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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 6

Defeat The Hero!

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Intense Battle! The Chef

"You expect me to eat this slop!?"

CRAAAAASH!

With a short-tempered roar, the table is flipped, sending the food flying. A waitress stands there dazed while other customers scurry out of the shop as if fleeing a fire. The troublemakers are a trio of typical thugs. With narrow, mean-looking eyes, they glare around the interior. A few more groups of customers hurry out.

This was taking place in a small eatery in the corner of a certain town, a place called "The White Armor Inn."

"Hey, hey, hey! We ordered food fit for humans!" "We don’t remember asking for pig feed!"

They shout one after another. Your average town thugs, basically. Of course, just because they’re a common type doesn't mean they aren't annoying. For starters, they're ruining a perfectly good meal.

"Actually, the food here is quite delicious. Though, I suppose people without nerves or brains wouldn't be able to tell the difference anyway."

Without even pausing my knife and fork, I speak up in a loud voice.

Twitch!

The men stiffen for a moment, then slowly turn toward me.

"...What was that...?" "Did you say something, you bitch?" "Eh? Say that again."

They spit out the most cliché lines possible, as if showing off their limited vocabulary. Good grief. I let out a deep sigh and—

"Customers!"

Just as I started to stand up, a man cut in from the side—likely the shopkeeper. He

was a slightly chubby middle-aged man with streaks of white in his hair. He glared sharply at the trio. The thugs slowly turned toward the owner.

"...Whaddya want? You got a problem after serving us this trash?" "You are bothering the other customers!" the owner snapped back firmly.

"What other customers? There aren't any," one of the men spat. "I'm right here," I said, poking at my chicken. "...This brat...!"

For a moment, the air grew thick with murderous intent. But before the man could act, the owner spoke faster.

"Regardless! If you plan on making any more of a scene, I'll have to ask you to leave!" "...Ask us to leave...?"

The men’s faces contorted with rage. "You bastard. Do you have any idea who you're talking to!?" "Interesting. Try kicking us out if you can!"

They lunged forward a step, and the owner instinctively recoiled. "Goone! Bruno!" "Yeah!"

In response to the owner's near-scream, two men lumbered out from the back. Likely the shop's bodyguards. They were massive, with muscles practically bursting out of their clothes. Judging by their movements, though...

...They're just big lugs. Typical.

"Heh... I see. Bodyguards, huh?" With a mocking tone, the thugs watched the two giants approach. "Sorry, but we're gonna have to ask you to leave." "You're a nuisance."

The thugs simply laughed in their faces. "...Fine. We'll play!"

That was the signal for battle.

THWACK!

One of the bodyguards was sent sprawling across the floor, flipping a table in the process. See? I knew they were weak. It seems neither the shopkeeper nor the big guys understood that there’s a big difference between muscles built in a gym and muscles forged in real combat. My sister back home has thin little arms, but she swings a Buster Sword around with a straight face.

"...Hah! Too easy!" The trio looked at the remaining bodyguard with smug grins. "What

now? Still want to go?" "...Tch...!" The bodyguard clicked his tongue and started backing away. Now, these three thugs weren't actually bad fighters. But they were only "big fish in a small pond" types.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!" With a desperate shout, the remaining bodyguard charged. Of course, a reckless attack like that wasn't going to do anything. One thug swept his legs, and as he lost his balance, another landed a clean kick to his face! The man went flying—

SMASH!

...Right into my table, pulverizing it. Along with all my food.

"...Hah... Idiots."

Thud! I stood up from my chair and stomped over to the thugs. They kept their smug grins. "...Oh? What's this? Going to the bathroom?" "Or maybe the little lady wants to play with us?" They burst into stupid laughter. I don't know what was so funny. Regardless, I walked right up to them, stopped, and flashed a wide, beaming smile.

"?" As one man looked at me with confusion, I placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered:

"Dipple Bash (Lighting)."

ZAP!

The man's body spasmed once before he collapsed on the spot. It's a basic lightning spell that sends a shock through whatever you touch. It's not very popular among mages who aren't good at physical combat, but see? It works perfectly if you use it right.

"Wha—!?" By the time the remaining two cried out in shock, I was already moving. An upward kick caught one under the jaw. With a dull thud, he flipped backward.

"...You!?" Finally realizing my strength, the last one scrambled into a fighting stance. I kicked a nearby chair at him. "Whoa!?" The moment he swatted the chair away, my fist—following right behind the chair—buried itself in his solar plexus.

"...Hmph. People who waste food eventually get what's coming to them," I muttered, looking down at the fallen men. If I'd fought them head-on, it might have taken a little more effort, but as long as I have the element of surprise, this is how it goes.

"Wonderful!" The owner, who had been watching dazed, suddenly let out a loud shout. He grabbed my hand and started pumping it up and down. "Incredible! So strong! To defeat those men so easily! I, Matthew, am truly impressed!" "...Uh-huh..." I gave a half-hearted response. "That settles it! Given your skill, I have a request I simply must ask of you!" "...Sure..."

I knew where this was going. He was probably going to ask me to be a bodyguard or something. Whether he sensed my thoughts or not, Matthew kept his friendly smile. "...Well, for now, why don't you come to the back so we can talk? I'll have a meal prepared for you. On the house, of course." "Really!?" The words escaped my mouth before I could stop them. Free food—anyone who turns down a deal like that is a failure as a human being. "Understood! I'll hear you out! But... before that, these three..." "...What about them?" I looked at the owner and said firmly, "I'm going to strip them of everything they own and throw them out in the street." "...Strip them...?" Matthew looked a bit suspicious. "Don't misunderstand. My goal is simply to 'crush them completely.'" ".....?" I continued as Matthew looked puzzled. "Listen, you can't just beat these types up a little. They'll just come back with a bunch of friends seeking revenge." "...I see... That makes sense," Matthew nodded solemnly, as if speaking from experience. "There's only one way to stop that. Hit them so hard they lose the will to fight back! Make them feel, in the marrow of their bones, that they'll be killed if they ever lose to you again! Besides, villains don't have human rights, so no one's going to complain." "...I see." He seemed convinced. "Well then..." I started rummaging through the fallen men's pockets. "Oho! They've got way more than I thought! Lucky! With this much, I'll be living easy for a while! Hahaha—*snort*—hahahaha!"

The shopkeeper stared at me as if I were some kind of alien creature.

"My name is Matthew. I've been running the White Armor Inn for about thirty years now." In a room in the back, while waiting for the food, Matthew started to tell his story. "The truth is, those three from earlier were hired by Maddock." "Maddock?" I asked, slurping duck soup. "Yes! The most evil man in this town, a servant of darkness! The thugs he hires harass us daily. My staff has quit, and customers have stopped coming!" "...Hmm..." Whether it was for the land or just a protection racket, he sounded like a typical underworld boss. If that's the case, he must have a lot of money saved up. If I beat him down and take everything, nobody will complain. "Please! Have pity on this old man and lend me your strength! Please! You must punish

Maddock!"

I crossed my arms for a moment. He probably wouldn't pay a high reward, but I could just take the rest from Maddock after I beat him. "What do you say? If you defeat him, as a reward... let's see..." The amount Matthew named was actually much higher than I expected. "Hmph! Understood! If that's the case, leave this to me, Lina Inverse!" "Ohhh! You'll take the job!?" "Of course! Now, tell me where this Maddock's hideout is." "With pleasure!"

And so, after getting the location of the enemy hideout, I headed out!

I returned to the White Armor Inn that night. "How did it go!?" Matthew greeted me with a look of high expectation. "...Hmph. The roast goose was quite good. The cream sauce sauté of Otal sea bream was also impressive." After my satisfied response, Matthew paused. "...Um... What are you talking about?" "What? The food." "...What about Maddock...?" ..... "Oh!" I clapped my hands. "You meant *that* 'How did it go?' Well, Matthew, I went where you told me, but there was only an eatery there. So, I just ended up eating..."

Matthew let out a deep sigh. "...That's because the owner of that eatery, 'The Black Axe,' is Maddock..." "WHAAAT!?" "If you'd told me that from the start, I wouldn't have tried to conquer the whole menu..." "....." Matthew was silent for a while. So, it was just a rivalry between two restaurants? That means I can't just beat him up and take all his property... I was a little disappointed.

"I understand. Tomorrow, for sure." "You're not going now?" "No... I can't possibly eat another bite today..." "...You... you really know what you're doing, right...?"

The Next Day— I returned to The Black Axe. The door creaked as I stepped inside. The food wasn't bad, but the place was strangely empty. "Welcome!" The waitress's voice echoed in the quiet shop. As soon as she saw my face, she beamed. "Oh! The customer from yesterday!" "...You have a good memory." "Well, yeah! Not many people can conquer the entire menu." "What'll it be today? Going for round two of the whole menu?" "I can't do that! No matter how much I like food! Don't talk about me like I'm a bottomless pit." "Let's see... today..." I looked at the menu and— Wait! "That's not it!" I shouted, standing up. To the confused waitress, I said, "Actually, I'm here on behalf of someone." "...I see..." I took a deep breath. "Tell Maddock. A messenger from the White Armor Inn is here." "...You're from the White Armor Inn!?" As soon as I said it, her face went pale. She turned and ran to the back of the shop as if fleeing.

Then, a man appeared from the back— "Ho... What does Matthew want with me?" I

stood there speechless for a moment.

"How did it go!?" "I didn't do anything," I replied bluntly to Matthew. "...Nothing...?" Matthew looked stunned. "What does that mean!?" "I should be asking you!" I shouted back. "You never mentioned that you and Maddock were twins!"

Yes—the man who appeared before me at The Black Axe was a dead ringer for Matthew. It turns out they were twin brothers. Matthew turned away with a sour expression. "I don't care! I cut ties with that man long ago! He's no brother of mine! Besides, he's the one in the wrong!" "I heard you were the one who started the harassment...?" "It was just a harmless little prank! Maddock is the one in the wrong for getting so worked up over it!" "What did you do? Maddock told me to ask you directly." "I just mixed some earthworms into the ground meat he uses at his shop!" ...Ugh... "...Normally, people would get mad about that..." "What are you saying!?" Matthew snapped, veins popping in his forehead. "Earthworms and ground meat look exactly the same at a glance!" *I don't think that's the point...*

"But then he! I don't know what got into him, but for revenge, he set up a strange trap at night! The next morning, as soon as I opened the door, a flood of nagashi-somen (flowing noodles) came rushing into the shop!" ...What is wrong with you two? That must have been a gruesome sight. "The whole shop was covered in noodles. I couldn't work for the rest of the day!" Well, if you keep doing stuff like that to each other, of course you're going to lose customers. "...You haven't done anything lately, right?" I asked cautiously. I'd been eating at one of these two places for the last two days. "Yes! Once I filled his shop's entrance with pilaf, I wisely realized it wasn't strategically efficient! Since then, I've been hiring bodyguards to fight a proxy war!" *Realize that a little sooner! What a waste of food...* "...So, what was the original cause of the fight?" "Of course! It was a difference in our approach to cooking!" I almost fell over, but I managed to hold on. "Cooking is food, and food is the fuel for life! But he insists that cooking is art or some nonsense!" "Does it matter? As long as it tastes good..." Matthew shook his head firmly. "No, it's not okay! A person with such wicked ideas must be punished!" "But both places have lost so many customers because of your constant bickering." "....." That hit home. Matthew was silent for a moment. "...T-That's why! That's why I have to take him down quickly!" "But is that okay?" I asked coldly. "...What is!?" "Even if I take down The Black Axe, Maddock will just say, 'It's only because your bodyguard was better! It doesn't mean you were right! You don't even have the guts to settle it yourself!'" "...Ugh... You're right..." Matthew looked down at the floor. "...He would definitely say something like that... But then, what should I do?" I looked him straight in the eye and said firmly: "Settle it. With

your own hands."

And so, the time for the final battle came. A vacant lot on the outskirts of town was the battlefield. Through my mediation, the two agreed to a direct confrontation. I set the time and place. A crowd of townspeople gathered to watch. I was merely the referee.

"You came... Maddock!" Matthew called out as Maddock appeared through the dust. "I thought you wouldn't show up." "And I thought you'd be at home shivering in fear," Maddock shot back. Since they looked identical, I had them wear different clothes. Matthew wore red with a phoenix, and Maddock wore blue with a dragon. Both were very baggy.

"Listen, Matthew!" Maddock pointed a finger. "If you call yourself a chef, settle this fairly with your own cooking!" "That was my intention!" Matthew nodded. The crowd started whispering. This wasn't what they came for. They wanted a messy fistfight, not a "who cooks better" contest. This is bad...

"Here I come!" "Go!" Ignoring the crowd's disappointment, they closed the distance. Maddock moved first. "Take this, Matthew! Pasta Web Net!" Countless white threads shot out from Maddock’s sleeves! The crowd roared. "It's pasta! Spaghetti pasta!" I provided commentary, amplifying my voice with a wind spell. "The strands are far longer than normal! They're wrapping around Matthew, trapping him! He can't move!" "Dammit! This is...!" "Matthew is struggling! But the pasta won't budge!" "—H-How is this... Al dente!?"

"...Hehehe... Exactly! Pasta I handmade with all my heart cannot be torn by human strength! The more you struggle, the tighter it gets! Now, what will you do? If you admit defeat, I'll let you go!" "Ohhh, terrifying! Maddock's pasta attack! Matthew is at a disadvantage! Is it over!? Wait—Matthew is smiling! Even in this situation, he’s smirking! Does he have a plan!?" "...Hah! Too naive, Maddock!" With a shout, Matthew suddenly started biting into the pasta wrapped around him! "What!?" "Ohhh! He’s eating it! Matthew is eating the pasta! As expected of pasta, it’s weak against this counter-move!"

After a while, Matthew finished eating and let out a burp. "...First, I'll praise the boiling time... But, Maddock! You got the salt level in the water wrong!" "Ugh! You saw through it!" Maddock looked pained. "Now it's my turn!" "Ohhh, Matthew is throwing something at Maddock! But Maddock dodges it easily! Wait—it’s coming back like a boomerang! Maddock barely dodges it again! It returns to Matthew's hand... It's a

pizza! A pizza pie! Matthew threw a pizza like a deadly weapon!" "...Hehehe... See, Maddock, the power of my hard-baked pizza! By changing the weight distribution of the toppings, it flies like a boomerang, and the hard-baked edge can cut through steel!" "Terrifying! The destructive power of Matthew's pizza! This has transcended cooking; it's a battle of the gods! But Maddock remains calm!" "Hmph! Interesting! If you think you can defeat me with that, then try it!" "A bold declaration! Matthew throws the pizza again! Maddock... he’s not dodging! He’s standing his ground! The pizza is... Whoa!?"

The crowd roared. "He caught it! He caught it in his mouth! And he’s eating it!" Maddock finished the pizza and smirked. "...Hehehe... The texture and seasoning aren't bad... But! Because the toppings are unevenly distributed, the flavor is inconsistent!" "Ugh!?" Matthew groaned. "Besides, this hardness is a bit much for an old man!" "Dammit! I’m just getting started!" Maddock smiled. "...Heh... That’s more like it! The real battle starts now!"

The battle grew even more intense. Matthew turned the ground into a sea of corn potage, and Maddock’s "Ikezukuri" (live sashimi) attacked Matthew. They both ate every attack the other threw. By the time the sun started to set, the long battle was finally reaching its conclusion. Both were holding nothing but hard-baked bread the size of an arm. They were clearly suffering from overeating, sweating and loosening their belts.

"Come on! Do your best!" "Go, Maddock!" "Matthew, don't lose!" The crowd shouted whatever they wanted. "Both of you, fight!" I called out, but neither moved. "Wait! This isn't just a staredown! They are slowly, inch by inch, closing the distance!" The crowd went silent. "They are cautiously measuring the distance! This is a master-level confrontation!" The tension was palpable. Then, the wind blew. "Hah!" With a synchronized shout, they both lunged!

Crack. With a dry sound, the two loaves of bread collided and snapped in half. They both caught the broken pieces in their mouths, swallowed, and then sat down on the spot. They were panting and couldn't move. It seemed they couldn't eat another bite. The crowd started grumbling. This is bad. Very bad. "Come on! One more step! Fight!" I tried to egg them on. But they really weren't moving. "FIGHT!" "...Impressive... Maddock..." Matthew whispered. The crowd's grumbling grew louder. "...You too... Matthew..." Maddock whispered back. Oh no! This is really bad! "Keep going! Fight, fight! You're almost there! The dawn of humanity is near!" Matthew slowly turned to me and said in a tired voice, "That's enough, little lady." NOOOOO! "Both Maddock and I have realized today that our skills are equal. Our approaches may differ, but our

passion is the same." The crowd was getting restless. "A draw... then?" Maddock held out his hand. DON'T DO IT! But my wish was in vain. Matthew firmly shook Maddock's hand. That was the end of the battle.

"Hey." *Gulp*. I turned around to find the crowd looking very unhappy. "If it's a draw, give us our betting money back." "And the entrance fee too!" "Wait, what!? You guys were betting on us!?" Matthew asked, shocked. This is bad! "Um, you see, this is...!" Before I could make an excuse, Matthew spoke coldly. "In that case, I won't be paying the reward." "What!? No matter how you look at it..." "I may have asked for a bodyguard, but I don't remember hiring a bookie." "NOOOOOOO!?" As I sank into despair, the crowd's "Give us our money back" chant continued on and on...

(Intense Battle! The Chef: End)

The Lost Tome

It always starts the same way. "You! You're a sorceress, aren't you!?"

In a certain town, in a certain eatery—the kind of place for travelers you can find anywhere. The person who spoke to me was a woman who looked like a priestess. She seemed to be about my age. Her long, translucent blonde hair and white clothing stood out in the dim shop. However, even a five-year-old knows that jobs that start this way never turn out well.

"...You're a sorceress, right!?" "...Yeah, yeah..." I nodded reluctantly. She sat down across from me without being invited. "Oh! I knew it! This must be divine guidance!" "L-Look, just tell me what you want," I said, trying to move things along. She had sat down like we were old friends and was now shouting about "divine guidance" for the whole shop to hear. The stares from the other customers were painful.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Fara Lamirage." As she spoke, she reached over and helped herself to a piece of fried squid from my lunch set. "...I'm Lina Inverse," I said, pulling the plate away. She gave me a momentary look of resentment. "I serve as a priestess at the church in the town of Cronberg, dedicated to the Earth Dragon King." Cronberg was quite far from here. It would take nearly a month on foot. "Actually, I was sent to this land to find something." "Something?" "Yes. But an organization seeking the same thing has hired an evil sorceress to interfere!" "Wait a second." I had a bad feeling. "What is it?" "You said 'evil sorceress.'" "Yes... one who wears a shameful outfit and lets out a piercing, annoying laugh..." "AUUGHHHH! I KNEW IT!" I held my head in my hands. Naga! I haven't seen her lately, and she’s already gone and strayed from the path!

"Is something wrong...?" Fara asked, looking at me curiously. "No, no! Nothing! S-So, basically, you want me to help you beat up that organization and get whatever it is you're looking for." "...That's correct." Fara nodded, though she looked a bit suspicious. "By the way... what is this 'something'?" "I'll tell you if you accept the job." I thought about it for a moment. The job itself didn't sound very interesting, but I couldn't just let Naga run wild. I've become quite the beast tamer lately! "Well?" Fara

asked after a while. "What's the reward?" "Twenty gold coins. Half now and half upon success." It wasn't a great deal, but it wasn't bad either. "Plus one silver coin, and I'll take it." "...One silver coin?" As she frowned, I held up a finger. "For the fried squid you ate."

"Now then, tell me. What is this thing you're looking for?" We moved to a table in the back of the shop, away from the other customers. She fell silent for a moment, then whispered: "The Tome of Luo Graon." I was speechless. Luo Graon. A sorceress who dedicated her life to the study of White Magic for healing and was named one of the five great sages of modern times. There was one book she never let out of her sight and never showed to anyone. Among sorcerers, it was known as the "Tome of Luo Graon."

But one morning, Luo Graon vanished from her bed, along with the tome. She left a note saying she didn't want anyone to see her corpse. There were many rumors at the time—that she had sealed the tome away, or that she'd been kidnapped by an organization seeking it. "...Is that true?" I asked skeptically. "There is no mistake." She sounded very confident. Hmm... though these things usually... "...What happens to the money if the book turns out to be a fake?" "Of course, I'll still pay you. That would be our mistake." YES! Now even if it's someone's diary or a kid's coloring book, I don't care!

"But Fara, why does your church want the Tome of Luo Graon so badly? It might have forbidden magic in it." It was past noon. We had left the town and were on our way to the destination. Apparently, it was near a village about two days' walk from here. "Well, even if we don't use it, enshrining the tome of the saint Luo Graon will increase the faith of our followers." "So, it's basically bait to attract more followers." "Don't say it like that! At least call it a 'crowd-puller'..." "I think that's also insulting, but whatever." I stopped in my tracks. "...What's wrong?" "I was going to ask about the people trying to interfere, but it seems I don't need to..." Before I could finish— "O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" That familiar, stupid laugh echoed through the afternoon air.

Whoosh! A black shadow landed on the ground, momentarily blocking the sun. Naga the White Serpent! "Hah! To meet in a place like this! Lina Inverse!" she shouted, pointing a finger. "L-Lina, you know her!?" Fara cried out. "I know her... but we're not friends." "That's a relief." "Hah! I don't know what you're whispering about, but since you've joined that side, we are enemies! Don't expect any mercy!" "You're the one... wait, that's not it! Naga! When you take a job, at least consider whether the people hiring you are good or evil!" "What do you mean by that?" It wasn't Naga who spoke. Behind her, a girl was standing in the shadow of a tree. She had black hair cut at the

shoulders and was wearing a priestess outfit slightly different from Fara's. "Hah! Milena! You stay back!" "I can't do that." Milena shook her head. "Who's that...?" "That's her... a servant of the church that worships the Water Dragon King, also seeking the Tome of Luo Graon." "You said they were an evil organization!?" "I did not!" While we were arguing, Milena continued. "How can I stay silent when a servant of a cult calls us evil?" "A cult!? What are you talking about!?" Fara shouted. "Besides, who worships a boring god like the Earth Dragon King? It's not normal!" "What did you say!? At least he wasn't easily defeated by the Ruby-Eye Demon King like your pathetic Water Dragon King!" *Take it easy, you two... you're gonna get cursed.* "WHAT!?" "SHUT UP!" They glared at each other. "Naga! Do it!" "Go, Lina!"

I stepped forward reluctantly. Honestly, I had zero motivation. But I'd already taken the down payment, and Fara hadn't lied to me. If I quit now, I'd have to pay a penalty. And I can't return money once it's in my pocket! Naga, on the other hand, seemed ready to go. "Hah! It seems we were destined to end up like this! Here I come, Lina!"

And so, the two-on-two battle began.

"Freeze Arrow!" Naga's cold arrows started the battle. I hid behind a tree to avoid them. Ugh, I guess I have to do this. Even if I don't want to fight, she's not going to hold back. I started chanting. I'll just end this quickly with one "Dill Brand" (Explosion)! Here I go! I jumped out. Naga and Milena were right in front of me! "Dipple Bash (Lightning)!" Fara's voice came from behind me. ...Eh?

ZAP!

Before I could even think, pain surged through my body. *Flop*. I collapsed on the spot. "Oh! Lina!" Fara's voice echoed behind me. "What are you doing at a time like this!?" *You did this! YOU!* As I cursed her in my mind, my consciousness faded...

"Ugh..." I finally woke up quite a bit later. The sun was setting, painting the surroundings orange. Apparently, Fara had messed up the spell or didn't have enough magic, so the shock was fairly weak. Otherwise, I'd be dead. I sat up, still a bit numb. Naga and Milena were gone, and Fara was lying nearby, knocked out. "Fara. Fara, wake up." "Ugh... mm..." After shaking her a few times, she opened her eyes. "Lina!?" she sat up quickly and looked around. "Where are Milena and the others?" "Gone. Probably went ahead..." "Ohhh! It's because you suddenly collapsed!" "Listen! You shot me in the back! Don't say I 'suddenly collapsed'! And don't give me any 'you jumped in the way' excuses! You had plenty of time to miss!" "I couldn't help it! I had my eyes closed when I fired!" "DON'T FIRE ATTACK MAGIC WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED!" She didn't

have an answer for that. She was silent for a moment. "...Well, think of this as a trial from God..." "This was a man-made disaster!" "More importantly, we have to catch up to them!" "...Yeah, I guess..." I nodded reluctantly.

"It should be around here!" Fara said, stopping. It had been two days since then. We had followed Milena and Naga to the location. It was a very remote area, deep in the mountains past a small village. "So? Where exactly is it?" "I don't know!" "Wait, what!?" "It's okay! As long as we have God's protection, we will surely find it!" "What is the basis for that statement!?" "There isn't any!" "AUUGHHHHH!" I held my head. This is why I hate religious jobs! "If you believe, you will surely receive protection!" "What if we don't find it!?" "We'll keep looking until we do!" "HIIIIIIII!" This is bad! At this rate, I'll spend the rest of my life looking for a place that might not even exist! "...B-But Fara, what if Milena and Naga find it first...?" "No! That's impossible!" "But they have 'God's protection' too!" "No, they don't!" "Why!?" "Because!" It's no use. Trying to persuade her is a mistake! "Come on, Lina! Don't just sit there! Let's find the place!" Fine! "Alright, I get it! I'll search every inch of this place!" "Oh! You understand now, Lina!" "Yeah! So, Fara, what does the 'place' look like?" "I don't know!" "WAAAAAHHH!" I sat down and started crying.

"...I guess you really can find things if you look..." I muttered a while later. Yes. Whether it was divine protection or just plot convenience, we found it. It was a cliff with a giant rock face. It was covered in vines and weeds, but upon closer inspection, there were several small, round holes in the cliff. Air vents, or maybe windows. Either way, it was man-made. At the base of the rock, there was a hole large enough for a person to crawl through. "I see... they used earth magic to make holes in the rock." I muttered. "But more importantly... someone has been in and out of here recently." "Then...!" I nodded to Fara. "Yeah, probably. Milena and Naga found this place too—they're probably still inside." "Let's hurry, Lina!" I nodded and cast a small light spell on the tip of my short sword's scabbard before entering the cave. The air was cool and damp. The ceiling was just high enough for a person to walk through. Looking into the darkness, I saw a faint glow—I immediately extinguished the light. "W-What happened!?" "Shh! Be quiet!" I whispered, pointing into the cave. "Is that...?" A light was visible deep inside. "Let's go, Fara." "O-Okay." We moved stealthily toward the light. After walking through a winding passage, we came out into a faint glow. The walls and ceiling were covered in glowing moss. "So that was the light we saw." I nodded. "Anyway, Milena and Naga must have passed through here. Let's hurry." The passage spiraled upward. "Lina, look!" Fara pointed to a door. "Let's check it out." I stood in front of the door and listened for any signs of life inside. "What are you doing?" Fara reached for the doorknob. Wait! What if there are traps!? Before I could

stop her, the door opened with a creak. Naga and Milena were right there. "GAAAHHH!" Both sides jumped back in surprise. "Hah! You've come a long way to chase us, Lina Inverse! I suppose we must settle this here!" Naga shouted from inside. "...I guess so..." There was a hint of hesitation in my voice. "...Hah! But don't be too reckless!" Naga sounded a bit scared now. "Fara, we're going in on the count of three. Be careful, they might attack as soon as we enter." "Wouldn't it be faster to throw a fireball in there?" "If the book is in there, we'll burn it!" "It's okay! We have God's protection!" "If we had that, we would have won last time!" "That was a trial!" Ugh, she has an answer for everything. Wait. "This is also a trial!" "I see! You might be right!" So that's how I have to handle her. "Alright, here we go. One, two, three!" We rolled into the room. There was no spell attack from Naga and the others. I hid behind a shelf and looked around. It seemed to be a laboratory. There wasn't much equipment and it didn't seem to be used much, but it was large. The shelves and pillars, along with the lack of light, made it hard to see. Where were they hiding? Time to make a move! I chanted a spell. "Lighting!" The light spell I cast stuck to the ceiling, illuminating the room. In that moment—something moved! "There!"

BAM!

My kick landed perfectly! Right on Fara's head! ...Eh? "Gwah!?" she cried out and went flying. I hurried over to her. "Are you okay, Fara!?" "Don't just kick me out of nowhere!" Oh, she's fine. "Well, you moved suddenly! Think of it as another trial and give up." She looked unhappy but stayed quiet. "Anyway, where are they hiding...?" Before I could finish— "Vipis Vora (Shadow Bolt)!" It was Naga's voice. A spell I didn't know. A ball of ice the size of a person appeared near the ceiling. ...What is that? As I watched, countless icicles shot out of the ball like a sea urchin's spines— Wait... no way... The icicles became ice arrows and started flying everywhere! "AAAUUGGHH!"

Fara and I hurried to hide. I could hear Naga and Milena screaming too. ...Seriously? The ice arrows weren't strong enough to break the shelves, but the ice ball kept producing them and scattering them everywhere. "Naga! Do something about that!" I shouted toward where she was hiding. "Hah! How naive, Lina Inverse! Do you think Naga the White Serpent would use a spell she can control herself!?" "DON'T SOUND SO PROUD OF IT! Ugh, I guess I have to do something!" If I use a fireball, it might explode if it hits an icicle... I'll have to use that spell. I started chanting. I timed it with the icicles and jumped out! "Flare Arrow!" Ten fire arrows shot out and destroyed the ice ball! "Hah! As expected of Lina Inverse!" Naga's voice came from somewhere. "Don't 'as expected' me!" I shouted back, trying to locate her. "If the Tome of Luo Graon was in here, it would be full of holes now!" "Hah! It's okay! It wasn't in here anyway!" "Naga! Why did you tell her!?" Milena shouted, but it was too late. Heh. Got it. I hid near

Fara again. "Let's go, Fara." "Go where?" "Outside, obviously. There’s no point in being here if the book isn't here." "But what about those two?" "It's okay. We'll just set a fire near the entrance and bar the door from the outside." "...You're a demon..." "What are you talking about? God says to use any means to win!" "He does not! What kind of god are you talking about!?" The god attack didn't work this time! "Anyway, Naga won't die from being medium-rare. So, let's go!" I started backing toward the door. Fara followed reluctantly. We were almost there. Then— *Thud!* The door opened. An old man was standing there. "Hey! You guys..." "Freeze Arrow!" Naga's voice shouted before the old man could finish. "Watch out!" I pushed the old man down. An ice arrow grazed my forehead. Dammit, they got the door! "Why are you wandering around here!?" I shouted at the old man. "...Well, why, you ask..." "Who even are you!?" Fara asked. The old man scratched his head. "Who? I'm just Luo Graon..." Fara and I both froze.

"Naga! Milena! Time out!" "I'm not falling for that!" Milena shouted back. "...No, really. Someone named Luo Graon just showed up." I walked out into the open with my hands up. "...Is that true?" Milena's voice was close. "It's true," the old man said. After a moment, Naga and Milena appeared from behind a shelf. "This is him..." I introduced the old man. "That’s impossible! Luo Graon disappeared over ten years ago!" Milena cried out. The old man said in a very casual tone, "Well, I had a lot of stress at work back then. I wasn't feeling well and thought I didn't have much longer to live. So, I just left that note and ran away... But I’ve been feeling great since I moved here. The air must suit me. Yes, yes."

"I see... the glowing moss and the equipment were because someone was living here." I nodded. "............I'm going home............" Fara muttered. She looked exhausted. ".....Me too....." Milena started walking away. "Wait! What about the Tome of Luo Graon!?" I shouted. Both of them shook their heads without looking back. I understood. Their churches wanted the *legend* of the saint's tome, not the *reality* of an old man's diary. The old man tugged on my cloak. "...What’s this 'Tome of Luo Graon'?" "The book you always had and took with you when you left." "Oh. That’s just a notebook. I wrote my complaints about work in it. I couldn't let anyone see it, so I took it with me. What about it?" "...Nothing... I thought so... Well, goodbye then." "Wait a second." The old man wouldn't let go of my cloak. "...Um... what is it?" "What is it? You trashed my house! You can't just leave! I won't ask for money, but at least clean it up before you go! Kids these days!" "...Wait, Naga!" I grabbed Naga’s cloak as she tried to sneak away. "O-ho-ho-ho! Do you need something, Lina?" "Yes. Actually, she’s the one who did this," I said, pointing at Naga. The old man shook his head. "Joint responsibility. Both of you, clean it up." "NOOOOO!" "Wait, what about Milena

and the others!?" "They're already gone!"

And so, Naga and I spent nearly a whole day cleaning the room. And I should mention that I never received the rest of the reward.

(The Lost Tome: End)

Ah, the Siege of Friendship

“Bughooooooh!” A blast of scorching flame turned into a gale, sweeping through the town streets! “*Gywaaaaaaaah!*” Lina and Naga screamed in perfect unison, scrambling to dive behind cover.

“...I... I didn’t think a Salamander would pop out so suddenly! Honestly!” “Hmph! It seems there’s a summoner among the enemy ranks,” Naga muttered with a fearless smirk. Meanwhile, the Salamander had lost sight of them and was looking around blankly. I chanted a spell under my breath—and leaped out to fire! Ice Varmor! With one hit of my spell, the Salamander’s body shattered into pieces in an instant!

The Kingdom of Ragudo—a small nation part of the Coastal States Alliance. It’s barely the size of a local fiefdom in a normal country, but the land is fertile, the crops are decent, and threats from demons or major powers are relatively low. But—when humans get too peaceful, they either start coming up with nonsense or get greedy. Recently, a large-scale rebellion led by the Minister broke out. The Minister’s faction took over the castle, forcing the King and his retainers to flee to the town below.

Our job this time: defeat or capture the Minister and suppress the rebellion. ...To be honest, I don’t like sticking my nose into messy national politics, but this job is an official request from the Sorcerers' Guild in the neighboring country of Felgol. The reason? The Minister who started the rebellion is actually a sorcerer. He’s managed to pull most of the army—and the local Sorcerers' Guild—to his side. If the rebellion succeeds, the kings of various nations might start thinking, *"Wait, does the Sorcerers' Guild help out with rebellions now?"* Naturally, the Guild would lose state protection—or worse, be viewed as a threat and persecuted. To prevent that, the Guild has to suppress the rebellion using its own power.

That’s why Naga and I, who happened to be nearby, were called in. Other sorcerers might be here too, but with the local Guild in the Minister’s hands and urban warfare breaking out daily, coordination is impossible. We tried talking to the exiled King to see if we could squeeze a reward out of him too, but since the local sorcerers betrayed him, he won’t even listen to us just because we’re magic-users.

Left with no choice, Naga and I headed for the castle where the Minister was hiding... but the town had become a literal "shuraba" (a scene of carnage). The King's forces and other Guild sorcerers had engaged the Minister's troops. I don't know who summoned what, but magical beasts are wandering around and houses are on fire. The residents seem to have evacuated, so at least we don't have to worry about collateral damage. "Right! Let's go, Naga!" I started toward the castle, which was dyed orange by the reflection of the rising flames.

"...They're even here..." I stopped after walking a short distance. A barricade blocked the entire road leading to the castle. Behind it were the Minister's pawns—sorcerers and soldiers. On our side of the corner were about ten soldiers, likely the King's men. They seemed stuck. *Alright! Time to show off and demand a reward later!*

"—You're the Royal Army, right?" "Who are you!?" a man who looked like the captain asked suspiciously. "We're here to help." "Sorcerers!?" The captain stared at me with doubt, but eventually nodded. "Fine. We're charging the barricade now. One of you provide cover from here; the other come with us." "Got it," I nodded.

Of course, I could end this instantly with a high-level spell, but the Guild warned me not to do anything *too* flashy, even in an empty town. Plus, making the captain look good would make things easier later. "Naga! I'll chant and jump out. Cover me!" "Hmph! Understood!"

We began our chants. "Charge!" At the captain's signal, the soldiers and I leaped into the street! The enemies behind the barricade noticed us and began chanting or nocking arrows. *Now!* At the perfect moment, Naga fired her support spell from behind! "**Bomb Di Wind!**" (Naga's *Fuuma Houretsudan*) An indiscriminate, wide-range spell that explodes with the power of wind... ...wait...

BOBAAAAAAN!

"*Dohieeeeeee!*" Drowning out everyone's screams, a violent pressure of "wind" blew away the enemy barricade—along with me and all our allies.

...Hah! I must have been out for just a moment. Since I realized what spell Naga was casting, I took evasive action, so I got off easy. I looked around to see the barricade scattered, and sorcerers and soldiers from both sides twitching on the ground. ...Ah... the captain is dead (exhausted) over there. And there stood Naga, hands on her hips, letting out a boisterous laugh. "O-ho-ho-ho-ho! How was that? Against the cover fire of Naga the White Serpent, a child's play barricade like that is as good as gone!"

“*SHUT UUUUP!*” *Mogoge!* The moment I stood up, my kick connected squarely with Naga’s head.

“...What was that for, Lina!? ...Aha... I see! You’re jealous of my brilliant performance!” “No! Listen, Naga! Do you even know what the word ‘support’ means!?” “Well, we won, didn’t we?” “We didn’t! I only survived because I’m a good person! You blew away all our allies too!” “Hmph. Don’t sweat the small stuff, Lina.” She flipped her hair. “In cases like this, you just mutter something like ‘a noble sacrifice’ or ‘your death wasn’t in vain’ and people usually forgive you. That’s how it’s always been.” “Like hell they’ll forgive us! ...Anyway! If the captain wakes up, this is going to get complicated. Let’s just move on ahead ourselves!”

Hyushugo! Fire arrows flew through the air, scorching the atmosphere. After several more battles, Naga and I finally reached the main castle gate. But here, the enemy defenses were thick. Sorcerers on the watchtowers and walls were spamming fire arrows. If I didn't mind breaking the castle a bit, breakthrough would be easy... but the problem is the gap between my definition of "a bit" and the general public's.

We were hiding behind a building, but the enemies kept raining arrows down anyway. If we stepped out, we’d be roasted. “What now, Lina!?” “Jump out when I give the signal!” “Hmph! Got it!” “—Now!” At my voice, Naga leaped out with full force.

Bohi.

...Ah... Eventually, Naga crawled back, toasted crispy black but somehow still moving. “...You... liar...” she wheezed, leaning on me. “What do you mean ‘Now!’... I took a direct hit from a fire arrow...” “—That’s your fault, Naga,” I said coldly. “You shouldn't take such jokes seriously...” “...Ho ho ho... Could this be ‘payback’ for earlier?” “...N-fufu... Well, I wonder...” “Ho ho ho ho!” “N-fufu fufu!” We glared at each other venomously for a while. But we couldn't stay here forever.

“Anyway, Naga, we have to break through first!” “Hmph! True!” “I’ll cast a wind barrier and jump out. You attack the guys on the wall from behind me!” “Understood!” We chanted, I threw up a wind barrier, and we leaped from the shadows! The fire arrows were deflected by my barrier. Naga leaped out from behind me and— “Oops, my hand slipped! **Burst Flare!**”

Hmph! Weak! I saw her "arrows don't always come from the front" attack coming a mile away. I dodged with ease. **BADOON!** Naga’s spell missed me and blew a massive

hole in the castle gate. “Fufufu... I have to contribute too!” I started my own chant. “My hand slipped! **Freeze Arrow**!”

Dogowashie! But Naga lightly dodged my spell, which proceeded to hit one of the sorcerers on the wall. ...Tch... she dodged it... “Oh, my foot slipped! **Ice Arrow**!” “My aim was off! **Dugradigudu!**” “...Hmph... not bad, Lina.” “...Neither are you... Naga...” We both started chanting again.

The duel continued, each of us dodging the other's spells by a hair. After a while, we realized the forces near the gate had been completely wiped out—mostly by our "stray" shots.

“Naga! Wait!” I stopped her as she began another chant. “Hmph! What is it, Lina Inverse? Are you going to beg for your life now!?” “No! I just realized the gate is destroyed. Let’s just get inside!” “Hmph! Why bring up such ancient history now!?” *(Since when did it become ancient history?)* “—The first one to the Minister might get a special reward from the King!” “Well, what are we waiting for!? Let’s go, Lina!” Naga pointed toward the castle.

We charged through the castle, leaving a trail of smoke and defeated soldiers. “Alright! Let’s keep going and crush the Minister!” “Hmph! I didn't need you to tell me that!” We sprinted through the courtyard and corridors, mowing down enemies. “By the way, Lina! Where is the Minister? I don’t know what he looks like!”

Zushaaaa! I wiped out and fell flat on my face. “...I... I forgot! I don't know what he looks like either!” But there was no time to mope. I stood up. “It’s fine! We'll just beat up everyone we see! He’s bound to be one of them!” “Hmph! Good point! Let’s go!”

Soon, a man blocked our path. “...Hmph... You’ve certainly enjoyed yourselves...” He wore a cloak and robe and spoke in a low voice. *Could it be!?* I pointed at him. “You! You’re the Minister, aren’t you!?” “...No... I’m not...” “...Tch. A dud.” “...A-A DUD!?” The man’s veins popped in anger. “Be quiet!” **DOGOPAGUSHAAAA!** Our simultaneous kicks sent "Random Mook A" flying into oblivion.

“You! You’re the Minister, aren’t you!?” “...Heh heh heh... Correct.” Finally! A hit! We had repeated this "Minister Identification" ritual so many times it had become a tradition. We were in the audience chamber on the second floor. At the end of the red carpet sat a sorcerer-like man on the throne. He was in his 50s or 60s, with thinning

white hair slicked back. Standard, unoriginal black robes. He had some dignity, but nothing extraordinary.

“I commend you for making it here. In honor of your strength, I’ll spare you if you join me. However, if you resist—” “Hey! Stop ignoring me and chanting your spell!” I didn't have time for a second-rate villain's monologue. I was going to finish this and take all the glory. I finished my chant and— “Look out, Lina!” *Gomege!* Naga’s kick hit me squarely in the back. I fell, my spell cancelled. “What was that for!?” “I felt a murderous intent in the air,” Naga said shamelessly. “Fufu. Must have been my imagination.” She started her own chant. *This brat! She’s trying to steal the credit!* “Like I'll let you! **Kick!**” My kick dug into Naga’s temple. “What was that for!?” “Don’t make me laugh, Naga. I saw through your plan to hog the reward ages ago!” “Gikh!?” She looked shaken for a second, then flipped her hair. “Hmph. Realizing my ambition is your misfortune... I can’t let you live!” “Try it if you can!”

“...Hey... you two...?” “*SHUT UP!*” we both screamed at the Minister. ...Wait, the Minister. I snapped back to reality and saw him chanting a spell to capitalize on our infighting. “**Dam Brass!**” I dashed to dodge the shockwave of wind. Naga took the hit and rolled across the carpet. *Perfect! The obstacle is gone!*

I chanted and fired: “**Freeze Arrow!**” The blue shockwave only ruffled the Minister’s thinning hair as he shrieked and ducked. He wasn't used to fighting. He had no combat experience or "guts." “...E-E-Enough! I don't need to deal with the likes of you!” He turned and ran. *Don't you dare!* He was the typical type—aggressive when in power, but a coward when faced with a counterattack. If you don't crush these guys, they come back later to pester you.

“You're not getting away!” I chased him, but— *Gubita!* Someone grabbed my ankle, and I ate the floor face-first. Naga, of course. “Ho ho ho... Too slow, Lina. I won't let you get ahead.” *She’s already back up!?* But then, a massive roar of voices reached our ears from outside.

We ran to the window. The King’s army had stormed the courtyard and was winning. “Oh no!” I shouted. “They followed the path we cleared! They’re going to steal the credit!” “That’s not funny!” Naga shrieked. “Naga! We have to split the reward! No more sabotage!” “Hmph! Fine!” We shook hands with fire in our eyes and chased the Minister to the roof.

On the roof, we cornered him. “Hmph! No escape!” Naga pointed. “Starting a rebellion with no guts or skill was your downfall! O-ho-ho-ho! Grovel at my feet and I

might make it painless!” “Shut up! Who would grovel to you!?” The Minister started casting a **Levitation** spell. He was trying to float away! “Stop him, Naga!” I yelled. If she hit him with an Ice Arrow now, he’d fall into the courtyard, and some random soldier would claim the capture. “Then what do I do!?” “This!” I chanted: **“Raywing”** With my high-speed flight, I zoomed past the floating Minister, turned around, and slammed into him like a battering ram!

Doghe. The Minister was knocked back onto the roof. I landed. “...D-Damn it...” He tried to stand, but Naga delivered a kick to the back of his head. “Enough of that!” *Gogeshie!* The Minister finally passed out. The rebellion was over.

The next day, we were summoned by the King in the town square. I was dreaming of gold—surely a King wouldn't pay us in bread crusts. “You have done well,” the King nodded. “Therefore—” “Wait!” a bandaged man shouted. It was the captain (now General Kurebyu) from the barricade. “These two... I suspect they were the Minister’s allies who switched sides when they saw the tide turn!” “What!?” we all screamed. “If you were our allies,” the General pointed at us, “why did you blow us up with magic at the barricade!?” “...*Ah!*” I remembered him. “Is this true!?” the King asked sternly. “Well... we did blow them up, but...!” “See!?” Naga stepped forward. “Don’t sweat the small stuff! Haven't you heard the saying? ‘To defeat the enemy, start with your allies’!” “NO ONE SAYS THAT!”

Things were looking bad. We were about to be treated as traitors. “Naga! We’re leaving!” “Why!?” “I’ll explain later! Run!” “They’re escaping! They *are* suspicious! After them!”

...And so, once again, we had to settle for the tiny, pittance-sized reward from the Sorcerers' Guild... *(Sobbing)*

(Ah, the Siege of Friendship: End)

Defeat the Hero!

"Aaaah! Please, Sir Hero! The evil sorcerer living north of the village... please, you must defeat them!"

In a cafeteria in a certain village, eyes moist as I spat out these perfectly cliché lines, I must shamefully admit it was none other than me—Lina Inverse. I wasn't in my usual garb, either. I kept my black bandana, but my clothes were those of a completely ordinary village girl. I hadn't gone crazy. This was the job.

"An evil sorcerer!?" The man turned toward me. He looked a bit over twenty. Dressed like a warrior, with a slender face and black hair. Honestly, he was incredibly handsome, but a sharp light burned deep in his blue eyes. —No mistake. This was the target. His name was Warren.

"Yes... actually, an evil sorcerer moved in nearby a while ago and has been causing nothing but trouble. Then I heard rumors that some strong-looking people were staying at the inn, so I came running." "I see. So that's how it is." The lines felt suspicious even to me, but without even questioning it, he coolly brushed back his hair and answered instantly. "Hmph! I understand perfectly. Then I, Warren, shall depart at once to punish this so-called evil sorcerer!"

The request from the Sorcerers' Guild came a few days ago: "Defeat the 'Hero' Warren and his party." Of course, "Hero" was a self-proclamation. What they did was barely different from robbery. First, they go to a town and gather rumors. Usually, there’s a story about a "grumpy mage living on the outskirts." Mages who shut themselves in towers or caves to protect their research aren't rare, but local rumors often blow their eccentricity out of proportion.

Warren’s group exploits those rumors. When a villager says, "That mage is suspicious," Warren buys them a drink and asks for more. The villager, fueled by booze, exaggerates the story. Then Warren stands up and says, "Fine! If they're that evil, we'll punish them!" ...And then they actually go and "punish" them. They take the mage's treasures, throw a tiny fraction of the loot at the villager "for the village's sake," and vanish. The villagers panic. They know the mage wasn't *actually* evil. But since they spread the rumors and accepted the money, they feel like accomplices. They keep quiet out of guilt and fear, drinking away the "blood money."

Warren and his partner Sammy use this shared sense of guilt to silence their witnesses. Over ten mages have already fallen victim to this. The Guild finally decided to strike back. Since a legal approach might allow them to blame the villagers, the Guild decided these people needed a lesson they'd never forget. Lina and Naga were chosen to bury Warren's group in the darkness.

"I don't know, Warren... this place gives me the creeps." The speaker was Sammy, Warren's assistant—a tall, blonde, flashy female warrior. She looked to be about the same age as Warren and seemed fairly capable. Warren had brought her along, guided by me, to the "problem cave." Naturally, no evil sorcerer lived there. It was a site prepared by the Sorcerers' Guild, filled with traps designed to welcome Warren's group.

"Hmph. Have no fear, Sammy," Warren said, flipping his hair. "No matter what trials await within, I, the Hero Warren, shall strike down evil in the name of justice!" His eyes shone with a dangerous, joyful light. "So... dreamy! You're dreamy, Warren! Truly a Hero among Heroes!" Sammy clung to him with watery eyes. *Good grief.* Anyone who calls themselves a "Hero" is usually either a moron or a liar. Still, I noticed Sammy's act felt a bit... off.

Sammy turned to me. "Thanks for the guidance, sweetie. You can head home now." But I couldn't leave. My mission was to tag along and "clumsily" lead them into every single trap. "No! Please take me with you!" "Huh!?" Sammy looked annoyed. "Listen, kid. This isn't a stroll. It's dangerous work. D-a-n-g-e-r-o-u-s." "I know! But I'm bored of village life. I want to see how professionals like you work!" I lied through my teeth.

"Hmph. Why not, Sammy?" Warren interrupted. "Young ladies naturally admire men like me. Though I must warn you, admiration alone won't keep you alive in this world. Consider this a field trip." Sammy looked visibly bothered—like she was thinking, *this brat is just in the way*—but Warren insisted. "Hmph! Then let the advance begin!"

As we went deeper, the cave became paved and lit with glowing moss. "Oh?" Sammy stopped. "Warren, look. There's a spot on the wall with no moss." There was a square of black rock at chest height, practically screaming *I AM A TRAP!* I panicked. *How am I supposed to "subtly" lure them into something this obvious!?*

"It's a trap... right?" Sammy muttered. "Hmph. You're still green, Sammy," Warren said, walking right up to it. "It's a decoy. They put something obvious here to distract from the real trap. Such deception won't work on me!" He placed his hand right on the black square.

Gaggon. A low rumble shook the earth. "AAAAAAAAAH!" Suddenly, a river of lava came rushing down the corridor! *Hey! The Guild told me there were traps, but lava!? Are they trying to kill me too!?* The lava was moving slowly. I could have stopped it with an ice spell, but I had to hide my identity. Sammy stepped up and chanted. "**Freeze Arrow!**" The lava turned into solid black stone. Not bad.

"Wow! That's amazing magic!" I pretended to be impressed. "Hmph... against the Hero Warren, such traps are child's play." "SHUT UP! I wasn't praising you! You're the one who triggered it!" "Don't be like that!" Sammy clung to him again. "It's because the Hero is here that I can perform at my best!" Warren grinned, but I saw a cold flash in Sammy's eyes.

As we continued, more traps went off. Exploding gunpowder, avalanches of sand, and even... thousands of eels falling from the ceiling. The Sorcerers' Guild's rage was palpable. Since these traps would kill me too if triggered, I gave up on luring them in and just tried to survive.

We reached a large hall illuminated by magical lights. Waiting for us were over ten Chimeras. "Hmph!" Warren drew his longsword. "A straightforward fight. Much better than traps." "Go for it, Warren~!" Sammy cheered from the back.

Warren charged. A bear-based Chimera swung its paw—a blow that would kill instantly—but Warren caught it with his left hand! "Hmph! Amateur." With a single stroke of his sword, he cut it down. *He's actually strong!* I had planned to sabotage Sammy's support spells, but Warren was winning single-handedly. His swordsmanship far surpassed mine.

Once the last Chimera fell, Sammy clapped. "Incredible, Warren! So strong!" "Hmph. It was nothing." Sammy looked around. "But still... all these traps and monsters, and not a single treasure?" "Hmph. Fear not, Sammy. Justice has been served. Is that not enough?" "...Maybe for you," Sammy whispered. I caught that. "M-maybe the treasure is just further in!" I added quickly. "You really think so?" Sammy glared at me. "Wait... weren't you here to get rid of an evil sorcerer, not look for treasure?" "Uh..." "Suspicious," Sammy said, stepping closer. *Did she figure it out?*

"O-HO-HO-HO-HO-HO!" A familiar, ridiculous laugh echoed through the hall.

Naga the Serpent stepped out of the shadows, wearing her usual spiked pauldrons and skull necklace. "O-ho-ho-ho! To think you've made it this far! But this is the end! ...Wait, what?" Naga blinked as she looked at us. "Master Naga!?" Warren shouted. "What!?" Sammy and I yelled in unison.

"Oh... it's Warren. I thought I'd heard that name somewhere." "You... you know her?" I asked. "Hmph. She's my Master," Warren said proudly. "Master of *what*!?" "Look at her and you'll understand." *I am looking, and I understand nothing!*

"Naga, what's going on!?" I asked, but Sammy beat me to it. "I knew it. You were trying to set us up!" "Well, since you caught on, yeah," I said, jumping back to create distance. "Wait, what's happening!?" Warren was still lost. "We were tricked, you moron! They're the villains!" Sammy pointed at us. "Villains!? Hmph. I see." He finally got it.

"O-ho-ho-ho! I've figured it out, Warren!" Naga pointed at Sammy. "You're being used by that woman!" "What!?" It all clicked. Warren was just a "Justice Idiot." He'd believe anyone who pointed him at an "evil" target. Sammy was the brains, feeding him rumors, stroking his ego, and pocketing the loot while Warren took all the public heat.

"In other words, the blonde next to you is the real villain!" I shouted. "So that's how it was!" Warren believed us instantly. Sammy shrugged. "Fine, the act is over. Warren is useless to me now that the Guild is involved. I'll just finish you all here." "Try it!" I barked.

Sammy began a chant. I rushed her, but she was fast. "**Dug Haut!**" Lightning erupted from the floor and ceiling. I took a direct hit and collapsed. It wasn't a lethal spell, but it paralyzed me. Naga and Warren were down too. "Weak," Sammy sneered. "I'll finish you now."

"O-ho-ho-ho! Sorry, but that won't happen!" Naga and Warren were already standing. "What!? How!?" "O-ho-ho-ho! Because unlike that girl on the floor, I am a woman of virtue!" *Liar! You probably just don't have nerves!* Warren was Naga's apprentice, so he probably inherited her weird durability.

"Fine! Have another!" Sammy chanted. "Hmph! Not a chance!" Warren charged, but Sammy fired a **Mono Volt** . Warren took it through his sword and collapsed again. *Fast recovery, but fast to fall, too.*

"Hmph! Then I, Naga the White Serpent, shall handle this!" Naga chanted her signature high-level Shamanism: "**Visfarank!**" A massive, legendary Black Dragon materialized in the hall! "What!?" Sammy shrieked. "O-ho-ho-ho! Behold my power! Grovel and I might spare you!" "N-Never!"

Naga pointed dramatically. "Black Dragon! Get her!" The dragon roared, swung its massive tail, and... *Papeeen!* ...it hit Naga. Because she was standing too close. *Behi.* Naga was slammed into a pillar and slid to the floor.

Silence. Even the dragon looked confused. "Pffft... AHAHAHAHA!" Sammy laughed. "I won! I beat a summoner who can call a Black Dragon without even trying!" "Hey," I said, standing up, finally free of the paralysis. "Don't get cocky, Sammy." "You think you can beat me!?" I chanted: "**Elmekia Lance!**" It's a spell that damages the spirit, not the body. Sammy dodged it easily. "Hahaha! All that talk just for a bluff so you could run!?" She stopped laughing. She realized I hadn't aimed at her—I had aimed at the Black Dragon Naga left behind. The dragon, now furious from being hit by my spell, turned its sights on the nearest person: Sammy. I didn't stick around to watch the rest.

Later, Warren apologized to Naga. "I'm sorry, Master. I moved without thinking." "Hmph. Warren, acting without your own will isn't justice. You're still green." "But Master... you taught me: 'Justice always wins. Strength wins in the end. Strength eventually goes out of control. Therefore, Justice is something that goes out of control.'" "Hmph... that was just a joke." "WHAT!? It was a joke!?" *Don't change people's lives with jokes!*

Warren decided to turn himself in along with the tied-up Sammy. "I was tricked, but I did help her. I'll accept my punishment." Sammy, meanwhile, was crying. Apparently, she had been swapping out "Heroes" like this for years. Warren led her back to the village with a smug "Hero" look on his face. *He hasn't learned a thing*.

(Defeat the Hero: End)

My Beloved Spineless Coward

"Eeeek! Help! Someone help me!"
A high-pitched, affected scream echoed through the backstreets of Bamond City, a bustling trade hub. Like any commercial center, the slums here were home to some rough characters. Judging by the scream, some sheltered noble girl had probably wandered in and gotten into trouble.
And if that was the case—it meant money!
"Alright!"
I pumped myself up and dashed toward the voice.
"No! Unhand me!"
The girl screaming was about sixteen or seventeen. She was a cute blonde, but... that frilly, neon-pink dress had to go. Personally, I'm not a fan of pink, and seeing it in a place like this made it look even gaudier.
"Whaddya mean, 'unhand me'?"
"Putting on airs, are we? You brat!"
Two men were bothering her—typical low-life thugs in standard hoodlum gear.
"Hold it right there!" I shouted.
The men froze and turned toward me. "Huh? Who the hell are you?"
"Stay out of this, kid!"
"Sorry, but I can't just overlook a scene like this," I said with a fearless smirk.
Now, the world is a complicated place, and the person being attacked isn't always in the right. However, in these situations, one thing is certain: you help whoever is more likely to pay.
"What'd you say, you little—"
Gech!
Before he could finish, I walked right up and buried the sole of my boot into his face. He crumpled to the ground instantly.
"Wh—! You bitch! How dare you!"
The second one rushed me with a pathetic lack of vocabulary and met the exact same fate.
Hmph. Piece of cake. Thinking a couple of street thugs could take on me—Lina Inverse, mercenary and sorceress—is a mistake they're about 200,000 years too early to make.

"Um... thank you so much for saving me," the girl said, bowing. "This is just a small token of my gratitude."
She handed me several gold coins. Jackpot! Just as I thought: wealthy and totally lacking a sense of money.
"You don't look like the type to wander the slums alone," I said, acting concerned. "Is something wrong?"
She went quiet for a moment. "...Actually, I'm looking for someone. I have to stop my Gardner! Please, will you lend me your strength? I'll pay you, of course!"
"Well, why don't we talk about it over a meal?" I replied.
Naturally, I had already decided to take the job.

"I am Elemi, a daughter of a noble and high-born house," she introduced herself.
"...Right." My fork paused. We weren't at one of my usual cheap-but-good spots; she had led me to a high-end restaurant where every table had its own waiter.
"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."
"A while ago, my lover... my dear Gardner... suddenly left home for some reason."
"A lover, huh?" I asked, cutting into some black shrimp. Romance wasn't exactly my specialty.
"He was my live-in tutor. Over time, we grew to love one another. But one day, he left a note saying, 'I have changed. I must change. I am heading down the path of evil. Do not look for me,' and vanished..."
Elemi broke down into "maidenly" tears.
"The path of evil, you say?"
"Yes! I asked my father to find him, but Father said there was no need. He's surely trying to use this chance to separate us because of our different social standings! Even though I am of noble blood and Gardner—though a long-time tutor—is a pauper no better than a stray dog! Just a lowly, pathetic sorcerer..."
Hey, don't talk about your boyfriend like that, I thought. That "lowly sorcerer" comment hit a bit close to home.
"So, I came to the slums to look for him myself."
"And that's when those thugs cornered you."
"Yes. I told them, 'If you know a man named Gardner and tell me where he is, I shall grant you a reward the likes of which you poor people have never seen,' and for some reason, they got angry..."
"Most people would..."
"Why? I was so careful with my polite language!"
Polite words, maybe, but her attitude was incredibly rude. She was the type who was fundamentally insensitive but believed herself to be considerate.

"Well, regardless... if he ran away, he probably has his reasons. Even if we find him, he might not want to come back."
"I know. But Gardner is gifted in both wisdom and magic. If that talent is turned toward evil, the destruction he could cause... I must persuade him. And if I cannot..."
"You'll have to take him down?"
Elemi nodded with a tragic expression.

We started searching the local inns.
"Gardner? Doesn't ring a bell," one innkeeper said.
"He might be using a fake name. About twenty, slender, handsome, long black hair. Maybe dressed like a mage," I described.
"I don't think so..."
I turned to Elemi. "Maybe he left town?"
"No! I know he is still here! I can feel it!"
"But why stay here if he's running away?"
"Because it's my Gardner! He lacks the initiative, courage, or competence to actually leave town!"
Wait, what? "If he’s that spineless, I doubt he's becoming a criminal mastermind..."
"No! It's because he's like that that his 'snapping' is so terrifying!"
At the very next inn, we got a hit.
"Yeah, he's staying here. Used a different name, but the description fits. He's out now. He seemed really fidgety and nervous, so he stood out."
"Fidgety and nervous? That’s him!" Elemi cried.
"What kind of guy is he, really?" I asked.
Elemi blushed. "He works like a plow horse, is as obedient as a dog... even though he's a tutor, he never complains when I shove chores on him, and just goes off to cry by himself later. He is my ideal man!"
That sounds like a slave, not a lover. No wonder he ran away.
"Elemi!?" A voice called from behind.
A handsome man stood at the door, looking stunned. Gardner.
"Why are you here!?"
"I've been looking for you, Gardner." Elemi approached him with watery eyes. "Come home with me."
"No!" Gardner shouted. "It's too late! My hands are already stained with sin! Since I left your house, I have committed several perfect crimes! I can never go back!"
"No! Gardner, return to the man you were! The man who lived in constant fear of others' opinions, acting groveling and pathetic—that's the man I loved!"
Seriously, stop insulting him to his face.

"It's true..." Gardner admitted. "When I was wagging my tail for you and being bullied every day, I was incredibly happy."
Don't admit it!
"But one day, I realized my sense of fulfillment was slightly... different from the rest of the world!"
You should have realized that sooner.
"So I left to change myself! To test my power, I challenged several perfect crimes and succeeded in all of them!"
I cut in. "Perfect crimes? Like what, specifically?"
"Hmph! Attempted skipping out on a restaurant bill! Attempted shoplifting! And attempted embezzlement of lost property!"
"So you're just a coward," I muttered.
"What!? Attempted crime is still a crime! And I'll have you know, there was even one attempted murder!"
"Let me guess: you hid in the shadows clutching a knife, breathing heavily, and watched as the person walked away?"
"W-were you watching me!?"
I knew it.
"What now, Elemi?" I asked.
"I can't let him pile up any more sins..."
"He hasn't actually committed any sins yet—"
"Please, Lina! Stop him! Even if you have to knock him down!"
"Fine!" Gardner shouted, interrupting me. "If you're that determined, I will fight your mercenary! If I lose, I'll go back. If I win, leave me alone!"
"Deal," Elemi said, totally ignoring my input.
Gardner turned to me. "We can't fight here. Today, at sunset. The small hill north of town. Be there!"
"Fine by me," I sighed.

Sunset came. The world turned orange, then violet-blue. Elemi and I were alone on the hill.
"He's not coming..." I muttered.
"Of course," Elemi said with a dreamy look. "He probably got scared at the last second and ran away. Because he's such a cowardly, despicable man. I believed in him."
"Don't 'believe in him'! This doesn't solve anything!"
We rushed back to the inn, and as expected, Gardner had already checked out and vanished.
The next day, we were moping in a cafeteria.
"Oh, Gardner! Where are you? Walking further down the path of evil!" Elemi wailed.

"I'm gonna deck him the next time I see him! Just thinking about it makes me hungry. Hey, old man! Another 'A Lunch' over here!"
"And a 'C Lunch' for me, please," Elemi added.
"Coming up! A and C for table five!" a waiter called out.
Wait... that voice.
"Gardner!?"
"What!?"
There he was, in a waiter's apron.
"Elemi!? Why are you here!?"
"Why are you here!?"
"I'm working a part-time job to pay for living expenses, obviously!"
"I thought you were walking the path of evil!"
"Even if I'm evil, I still get hungry! I have to pay the bills!"
"Forget that!" I barked. "You stood me up for our duel yesterday!"
Gardner turned pale. "Th-that was... I had a sudden stomachache right before the duel, so—"
"Liar!" I threw a spoon that hit him square in the forehead. "Who checks out of their inn just because of a stomachache? Stop acting like a kid and fight me!"
"F-fine!" he said, rubbing his head. "I'm a man. I won't break my promise again!"
"You already did yesterday..."
"Let's settle this! Right now!"
"Finally." I stood up.
"No, Gardner!" Elemi cried. "Why are you acting so cool? That's not the real you! Where is the fidgety, depressed, wonderful man I know?"
That is not the definition of 'wonderful.'
"Forgive me, Elemi. I told you—I have changed."
Gardner looked at me. "Let's take this outside. But don't expect me to hold back just because you're a girl."

We stepped outside the shop.
Thud. Gardner immediately collapsed into a ball by the door.
"Oh, Gardner! How wonderful!" Elemi cheered.
"You...!" I stood over him. "After all that big talk, you're shivering by the door!?"
"B-but... my legs are shaking... and my stomach really hurts now..."
This guy was a professional coward.
"Shut up! I don't care if your stomach hurts, we're finishing this!" I started chanting.
"Wait—whoa!"
Gardner realized I was serious and bolted. I made sure no bystanders were in the way and released:

"Dug haut" The ground rippled toward him, ready to explode—but just before it hit:
"Raywing!"Gardner took to the air, surrounded by a barrier of wind! He had finished his chant in an instant.
I knew it. Like Elemi said, he had talent.
"Raywing!" I chanted, flying up to chase him.
Raywing is a high-speed flight spell, but it's hard to control, so most mages use the simpler Levitation instead. The fact that he was using it proficiently meant he was no amateur.
He tried to flee the city, but realizing I was catching up, he banked sharply and dove back into the streets.
He was clever—he was using the crowded streets to prevent me from using large-scale spells. I landed on a roof to get a better vantage point.
"Freeze Arrow!" I cast.
"Fireball!" he countered.
My ice arrows collided with his orange sphere in mid-air.
Gowash!
The fireball exploded, turning my ice into steam. He was good. He knew I couldn't use fire spells near wooden houses, and I couldn't use earth spells from a roof. He was forcing me into a stalemate.
I canceled Raywing and used Levitation to float down.
"Elmekia Lance!" Gardner fired as I descended.
I had predicted this. I canceled my spell, dropped the last few feet, and twisted to dodge his spirit-striking beam.
"Not bad, kid," I said.
We squared off. Gardner moved first.
"Uwaaaah! I’m still scared!" He burst into tears and crouched down.
"Don't start crying now! I’m losing my motivation—"
"Freeze Arrow!"
"Dammit!" I jumped back, but—
Gagun!
"Ow!"
One of his ice arrows had pinned the corner of my cloak to the ground, freezing it solid. I was stuck.
Gardner started his next chant. This was it.
"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?"
Clang!
A heavy frying pan flew out of nowhere and smacked Gardner in the back of the head.
"Ow! Who—!?"
Gardner froze. Standing there with an apron was a middle-aged man.

"T-Tencho (Manager)!?"
It was the owner of the cafeteria.
"A part-timer like you shouldn't be slacking off when we're this busy! You're clumsy with the customers, and now you're skipping work!? You're fired!"
"No! I'm sorry! Please don't fire me! I'll work right now!" Gardner started groveling.
"Shut up! Get off my leg! You're fired!"
"Please, anything but that!"
And just like that, our high-level magical duel was ended by a labor dispute.

"In the end, I decided to go back with her," Gardner said the next day, smiling broadly while hugging Elemi.
"I realized it. Being a groveling servant for the woman I love is better than groveling for strangers."
Is 'living with dignity' just not an option for you?
"Besides... I got fired from the restaurant anyway..."
I bet that was the real reason.
"Thank you for your help, Lina," Elemi said, handing me a small leather pouch.
I looked at the pouch, then at her. It felt... light.
"Um... this feels a lot smaller than what we agreed on."
"Yes," she said with a bright smile. "The request was to find him and stop him. You found him, but you weren't any help in stopping him. So, I gave the rest of the reward to the restaurant manager who actually stopped him."
Snap.
I froze.
"Well then, Lina. Farewell!"
Elemi and Gardner walked off into the crowd, flirting and bullying each other as they went.
"What... what was that job even for...?"
I stood there in the middle of the street, clutching my tiny pouch, completely stunned.

(My Beloved Spineless Coward: End)

The Spineless Battle

Thump.

Something light bumped against my temple.

"Huh?"

I let out a small grunt and looked toward where the object had flown from.

The area was an upscale residential district.

To my right—the direction it came from—was an endless stretch of hedge, and beyond it, a single, absurdly grand mansion.

There wasn't a soul in sight—

Or so I thought, until my eyes snapped to a stop at a certain point.

In the middle of that dense green hedge, two eyes were peeping out.

Someone was crouching in the shrubbery, staring at me.

The moment our eyes met, the figure flustered and hurriedly looked away.

Wait... that pathetic, servile gaze...!?

"...Could it be... Gardner?"

At my call, the eyes visibly wavered with agitation.

"...Wait! Shh! Don't call me by name in public! It’s embarrassing!"

He protested in a frantic whisper.

Bullseye... I knew it.

This man was a sorcerer I’d met just a few days ago through a certain incident.

To describe his personality in a word: spineless.

Determined to change himself, he had left his post at a manor, and his lover had hired me to track him down.

The pay for that job had been far lower than expected, so to vent my frustration, I'd been trying to conquer every restaurant in this town. I'd cleared almost all of them, but...

Who would have thought that while passing down this random street, I'd cross paths with this spineless wonder again?

"So? Do you want something?"

"For now, please come over here. It's embarrassing to talk in a place like this."

...Well, I wasn't exactly thrilled about being seen talking to a hedge either.

But is it really okay to just wander onto the property here?

Checking to make sure no one was watching, I used a Levitation spell to hop over the hedge.

It was the backyard of a certain mansion. Judging by the architecture and the garden ornaments, it was definitely a wealthy household.

Squatting under the hedge that separated the garden from the road was a single man.

Long black hair, refined features—and that distinct, servile glint in his eyes.

"...Ah. Thank you for your help the other day."

Still in a squatting position, Gardner gave a polite little bow.

"I saw you while I was weeding the garden..."

"So—what's the story?"

Since he showed no intention of standing up, I had no choice but to squat down with him.

"Actually—it's about none other than Elemy."

"Oh...?"

Elemy was the one who had hired me to find Gardner: his lover.

She claimed to be the daughter of a noble house and Gardner was her tutor, so this must be Elemy's home.

"Thanks to you, I ended up moving back here after that incident. From now on, things were supposed to go back to how they were—Elemy making me weed the garden,

ordering me to filch snacks for her, blaming me for things she broke... I thought I could go back to those happy, fulfilling days."

...Is that really the kind of treatment he's used to?

Well, if the guy is satisfied with that, is it... okay?

"But—it happened. The very day we returned, the master... Elemy's father... said he was sending her to an acquaintance's house for etiquette training, and eventually, he's going to make her marry their son...!"

"Is this... one of those typical political marriages?"

"Probably! He didn't listen to a word of Elemy's protest, and yesterday, she was forcibly sent away! This... I can't let this happen! I want to bring her back somehow! Please! Lend me a hand!"

...Hmm. To think all that happened in just a few days.

I'm not a fan of political marriages myself. Any house that can't survive without sacrificing its children might as well go bankrupt.

Granted, Elemy is arrogant and insensitive despite her polite speech, she's basically a sadist, and the last fee she paid me was peanuts. But...

.....

...Maybe I should just leave them to it... after all...

"I'm begging youuuu!"

Gardner wailed, as if reading my inner thoughts.

"Gah! Fine, I get it! I get it, so stop crying and clinging to me! ...Fine. What's the fee?"

"...Eh... do I really have to pay a fee...?"

"Of course you do!"

My angry shout echoed through the neighborhood.

"So? Where exactly did they take Elemy?"

After settling the fee, I questioned Gardner.

...Well, Gardner is just an employee. He couldn't afford much, so it looks like the pay will be even lower than last time, but I'm already committed.

"According to the Master, she's at the house of someone named Gaius Cordwell in Verna City."

"According to the Master?"

I frowned at Gardner's words.

"You mean—Elemy's father told you that himself?"

"Yes, but..."

"Isn't that strange?"

"Strange...?"

"Think about it. Based on what you and Elemy told me, her father knows you two are lovers, right?"

"Yes, I believe he's aware."

"Then do you really think he'd just honestly tell you where he sent her? He probably gave you a completely different location on purpose."

"...You think so...?"

"I know so! Which means, first things first, we need to have a direct negotiation with Elemy's father!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

Gardner let out an absurdly loud cry as I stood up.

"Direct negotiation... that's...!"

"It's the only way. Only the father knows where she really is. Besides, even if we bring her back, if we don't convince him here, he'll just send her away again. So, we've got to talk him around!"

—Of course, I didn't think he'd be convinced that easily.

I added that thought silently to myself.

"...I... I understand. But—"

"But?"

"Please don't tell him I was the one who asked! Please!"

Gardner uttered that spineless plea with actual tears in his eyes.

"I am Clove, Elemy's father."

A short while later—

After marching through the front entrance and claiming to be an acquaintance of Elemy, the man who appeared before me was in his late thirties or early forties. He had a well-groomed mustache and looked like a rather distinguished middle-aged guy.

"I hear you have something to discuss regarding Elemy?"

He spoke while holding a cup of aromatic tea in the drawing room I'd been led to.

"Yes. Actually, a few days ago, at her request..."

"Ah! The sorcerer!"

He interrupted me, a slightly displeased expression crossing his face.

"My daughter mentioned you. She spoke of a sorcerer who helped find Gardner when he ran away—someone who was less useful than a restaurant owner."

Twitch.

...She... she hasn't changed at all, has she... Elemy...

Well, I didn't expect her personality to flip overnight, but...

Still, this guy telling me that right to my face... he really is Elemy's father.

"But regardless, you did something entirely unnecessary."

Ugh.

I felt a surge of irritation but kept my face neutral, speaking in as calm a tone as possible.

"Oh? So, tearing apart two lovers and forcing her into an engagement is 'necessary' then?"

"It's fine. Really."

To my surprise, he answered quite casually, rather than getting angry.

"...Fine...? How is that fine!? Those two love each other!"

"Then let me ask you—do you honestly think those two are fine the way they are?"

"...!?"

Being asked that point-blank made me lose my words.

...Well, even if they’re satisfied with it, I wouldn't exactly call their relationship 'normal.'

"As for Elemy... well, she might be a bit thoughtless..."

A bit? Is that what you call it?

"More importantly! What’s pathetic, man to man, is Gardner! You can say whatever you want because it’s not your problem, but if I recognize their relationship, he becomes my son! The heir to this house!"

...!

Thinking about it that way... yeah, that might be a bit unpleasant.

If I had someone like that in my family, I’d kick them out.

And if it involves inheriting the house, I can understand Mr. Clove’s anxiety.

"To be honest, when I heard he left to change himself, I thought, 'Not bad!' I figured he’d grow as a person, so I even told Elemy not to look for him. —But then! I don't know what happened, but Gardner came crawling back wagging his tail for Elemy! Before, he seemed to have doubts about his own worthlessness, but when he returned, he had completely accepted it! What's the point of making a resolution to leave, only to come back twice as small as before!?"

...Ugh... He... he has a point...

"I can't entrust my daughter and this house to such a spineless man! Besides, as long as Gardner is with Elemy, he'll never be independent! That's why I separated them!"

...Mmm... I see...

—Wait, why am *I* the one being convinced?

"B-but that just means if Gardner had a little more spine, things would be different, right?"

"I think I’d need more than 'a little'... but essentially, yes. Though, that's probably an impossible dream."

I actually agreed with him.

"...By the way... where is Elemy now?"

"Didn't you hear from Gardner?"

Mr. Clove asked quite casually.

"He asked you, didn't he? 'Elemy was taken away, do something!' or whatever. —Just so you know, the location I gave Gardner is the real one. The house of an acquaintance, Gaius Cordwell, in Verna City. I didn't think he had the spine to go save her himself, so I told him the truth. —But let me be clear: even if you bring her back, I won't recognize their relationship."

"...Oh ho..."

I narrowed my eyes while holding my teacup.

"So, if Gardner *himself* brings her back, you'll recognize them."

"Wait! I didn't say that!"

"Well, the only reason you won't recognize them is because he lacks backbone, right? Conversely, if he shows enough spine to snatch away the woman he loves, then he passes, doesn't he?"

"No, that's..."

"Or is this 'backbone' stuff just a front, and your real goal is a political marriage?"

"A political marriage? How rude! It's nothing like that! If he really shows some spine—"

"You mean it? Truly?"

"...!?"

Heh. Got him. Right into my leading question.

"Then it's settled. If Gardner himself succeeds in rescuing Elemy, you recognize their relationship. Okay?"

"Agggh! Fine! Do whatever you want! —But only if *Gardner* does it! I won't recognize it if *you* rescue her!"

Mr. Clove shouted in a half-desperate tone.

Alright. The deal is struck.

Now, all that's left is for Gardner to rescue Elemy!

...Though, I have a feeling that’s the hardest part.

"You succeeded in convincing him!?"

Gardner’s face lit up as he spoke, while he was doing laundry shoved onto him by the maid.

"Sort of. Just like you heard, she’s in Verna City. Depending on how things go, he might recognize your relationship."

"Really!? Thank you! Thank you so much!"

With a massive grin, Gardner bowed repeatedly.

"In that case, I'll leave the rest to you! I'll stay here and pray for your success!"

...Excuse me?

"Gaaah! What are you talking about! You're coming too! To rescue Elemy! Or rather, *you* are the one who has to rescue her!"

"Whaaaaaaat!? Why do I have to do that!?"

"It's *your* problem in the first place! Listen up! Mr. Clove said he might recognize you, but the condition is that *you* show some spine and *you* bring her out!"

"That's impossible! If I try to take her out and fail, I'll be handed over to the authorities!"

"...But you're fine with *me* doing it...?"

"Well... in that case, see, I'm not the one getting caught."

...Well, I knew he was this kind of person, but...

"Besides, look, I have to do the laundry, and weed the garden... and leaving this town to travel is just too much for me... —I know! The point is just to show I have guts, right? Then—I'll do it—I'll really do it—how about I try touching a caterpillar or a spider!?"

.....

"...Can you... not touch them?"

"No. They're... kind of scary, aren't they?"

"Gah! Why are you saying such spineless things with such a cheerful, confident face! You have enough magical skill to trade blows with me, so you should be fine against

caterpillars or even common bandits! Besides! Elemy must be waiting for you to come save her! Right!?"

"...Do you think so...?"

"I do!"

"...But... Oh! I know! You can disguise yourself as me..."

"I said that's not the point! Anyway! You're going! Got it!?"

"...Well, but..."

"D-O-Y-O-U-G-E-T-I-T!?"

"I... I get it!"

I grabbed him by the collar, and he finally seemed to cave, nodding his head frantically.

...Geez...

Can he really rescue Elemy like this?

"I'll go! I'll go with you! —But before that, let me just finish this laundry. Otherwise, the maid will be mad at me later."

...Yeah, this might be impossible.

And so—

It was about five days later that Gardner and I arrived in Verna City.

Normally, it should have been a two-day trip...

But Gardner kept running away—from bandits, from thugs in town, from a barking dog—and it took forever to drag him back.

Some of you might have heard of Verna. It's a town somewhat known for its silk weaving.

An upscale residential area sat in the center of town. Shops lined the streets surrounding it, and beyond that was the common downtown area.

The weaving workshops were further out, and during the day, the sound of looms echoed from all directions.

The Cordwell estate, where Elemy was supposed to be, was near the very center of town—in a corner of the upscale district.

It had a sprawling garden and an unnecessarily grand manor.

At first glance, security seemed quite light. There were guards, but only 'technically.'

"...But... doesn't this look suspicious...?"

Crawling along the roof of the manor, Gardner whispered his complaints to me.

It was night.

—Though not quite midnight. Ideally, I wanted to wait until everyone was sound asleep, but then Elemy would be asleep too.

Honestly, I didn't think Gardner had the spine to wake a sleeping Elemy.

"Maybe we should just go to the front door during the day and talk to them...? That way, it would technically count as me taking her back..."

"Listen, Gardner. If we, total strangers, go to the front and say 'Give Elemy back,' do you really think Mr. Cordwell is going to say 'Oh, sure' and just hand her over? Besides, I don't think Mr. Clove would be satisfied with that. This time, it's less about the rescue and more about whether you show some spine."

"...Well, that's true, but..."

"Anyway, we're doing this! Remember, you're the star! If the guards find us, I'll draw them away, and you find Elemy and get her out!"

"Whaaaaaat!? Me, alone!?"

"...Or do you want to be the one drawing the guards away?"

"...!?"

"Then it's settled."

I cut him off and began crawling along the roof again.

It was definitely worrying to let Gardner act alone, but maybe it was for the best.

In popular love songs, that's how it goes, right?

Gardner slipping past the guards, going to his lover alone. A moving reunion, and a burning passion!

...Well, knowing these two, I didn't expect it to go exactly like the songs...

"Since we don't know where Elemy is in this manor, we'll just have to check the rooms one by one. Which means there's a high chance someone will find us. When that happens—remember: you're the only one who can rescue Elemy. —Here we go."

Waiting for a patrolling guard to pass, Gardner and I cast our Levitation spells.

The manor was three stories tall. The first floor was probably drawing rooms and dining areas.

That meant Elemy was likely on the second or third floor.

We'd just have to check from the top down.

I hovered in the air in front of a nearby window.

No light leaked from the closed shutters. That meant no one was awake inside.

"—We'll start here, Gardner."

"...A-are we... really doing this...?"

His voice was trembling.

"We didn't come all this way just to say 'just kidding.' Put some spine into it!"

I examined the window. It looked like a standard inner latch. No need for magic. I pulled a small tool from my pocket and easily flicked the latch.

I slowly opened the window, making sure it didn't creak—

And at that moment.

"Flame Arrow!"

Along with a voice I'd never heard, several glowing red arrows of fire shot out from the room!

"Waaaagh!?"

I nearly flipped over in mid-air, barely managing to dodge.

...What...!?

"They're here! Intruders!"

Along with another voice, a lamp was lit inside the room.

A guest room, perhaps? Inside the fairly large room were about five or six rough-looking men.

The one who'd shot the Flame Arrow was a man who looked like a sorcerer. The rest were either traveling warriors or thugs.

Given that they called us intruders, they must be the guards, but...

Why were so many people in one room with the lights off!?

"—What!? Intruders!?"

The voice came from somewhere else.

"Where!?"

"There! Outside the third-floor window!"

Yet another voice from another spot.

Looking around, almost all the windows of the manor were thrown open, and five or six men were peeking out of each one.

"Eeeeeeek!?"

The scream Gardner and I let out was perfectly in sync.

Could the light garden security have been a camouflage for this insane level of internal security!?

Why would they hire this many people—

But action before thought! With sorcerers among them, there was no advantage to staying in the air.

"Gardner! Up!"

I controlled my levitation and hopped back onto the roof.

"We're going with the plan!"

I declared, standing on the edge of the roof so the men below could see me, and began chanting a spell.

Men began pouring out from the front door, the windows, the back door—you name it.

There must have been at least a hundred. None seemed to have bows, but the chants of the sorcerers reached me on the night breeze.

Time to give them a little taste!

"Bursting Smoke Dance!"

KABOOM!

"Waaaaagh!"

The countless small fragments of fire I released rained down on the crowd below!

Explosions and screams echoed.

—Of course, I didn't intend to 'defeat' them. The Bursting Smoke Dance sounds and looks flashy, but it’s not very lethal. I’d even adjusted the spell to be less damaging and more spectacular.

The goal, of course, was to scare them and draw their anger and attention toward me.

However, it seemed some sorcerers hadn't been interrupted by my attack, and arrows of fire and ice began flying toward me from all directions.

...This... is actually getting a bit intense!

I ran across the roof, staying visible to those below, while chanting under my breath—

"Raywing!"

I released the high-speed flight spell and leaped from the roof!

I flew around, teasing the swarming guards, drawing them all into one clump.

—It would be easy to lose them, but that would defeat the purpose of the decoy.

Timing it right, I cancelled the spell and began another chant while running away.

"Wait, you brat!"

"Surrender! You can't escape!"

"Your mother is crying for you!"

They shouted all sorts of nonsense as they chased me, and I turned and released a spell.

"Magic Wind!"

The strong gust pushed them back, making them stumble.

A Flame Arrow someone shot was blown by the wind and hit someone else, but that wasn't my problem.

...To be honest, I was a bit intimidated by the numbers at first, but they seemed like a disorganized mob.

If I could just lure them out of the grounds, it would be fine, but a few of the calmer ones would likely stay behind.

It would be bad if they went after Gardner.

So, as tedious as it was, I'd have to keep dragging them around the property.

Jeers, shouts of anger, and attack spells flew from the enraged crowd behind me.

"Earth Spirit Path!"

"!?"

Hearing the 'Power Word' mixed in the jeers, I hurriedly made a sharp turn.

The front line of pursuers, pushed by those behind them, kept going straight—

CRASH!

"Gaaaaah!?"

A little ahead of where I turned, they sank into the ground with a scream.

I wasn't the one who did it. It must have been one of the sorcerers.

Using the Earth Spirit Path—a tunneling spell—they'd dug a hole under my path, creating an instant pitfall.

I'd noticed and turned, but the pursuers hadn't and charged right into it.

"Wh-why you...!"

They became even more enraged. Alright! Everything's going my way!

Just as I thought that—

"—Calm down!"

A man's resonant voice echoed through the area.

Everyone's movement stopped instantly.

All eyes turned to the man standing alone on a balcony on the second floor of the manor, looking calmly at—well, at me.

"I am the master of this manor, Gaius Cordwell. I have heard the story from Mr. Clove."

He spoke with a clear, carrying voice.

He looked about the same age as Mr. Clove. A portly man, but he didn't give the impression of being fat; rather, he had a dignified air about him.

"I was told you were coming to take Elemy to test your 'guts.' And since I was told not to hold back—well, I'm doing this properly."

—I see. While Gardner and I were taking our sweet time traveling, Mr. Clove's letter had arrived, and Mr. Cordwell had hired mercenaries and whatnot to wait for us.

I didn't think he needed to spend *that* much money, but some people with too much time and wealth like to spend it on weird things.

He was clearly one of them.

"...Hm!?"

Mr. Cordwell frowned.

"—The letter said there were two of you—and the one who was supposed to take Elemy was a man... Oh!"

He finally realized I was a decoy and shouted to the guards.

"She's a decoy! The main one is the man—he's probably already inside! Find him!"

Following his orders, the guards scrambled back toward the manor.

—This is bad!

I ran toward the manor as well, following them.

I'd bought some time, but I didn't think it was enough for Gardner to find and rescue Elemy.

Which meant he was likely still wandering around inside.

If the guards found him, could he escape safely?

—No.

He'd definitely cry and apologize.

And then Mr. Cordwell would tell Mr. Clove, 'That guy really is spineless.'

Then the relationship between Gardner and Elemy—and my fee—would all go up in smoke.

I had to prevent that at all costs!

I jumped through a nearby window, ran through a room, and out into the hallway.

According to my guess, Elemy was on the second or third floor. Gardner was probably wandering around there too.

So, the stairs up—

As I was looking around, a voice called out from behind.

"Oh? Lina-san?"

It was a familiar voice.

"Elemy!?"

I turned around, and there she was, just as I'd thought. Wearing a pale blue dress with an absurd amount of unnecessary frills, it was none other than Elemy.

But... why was she on the first floor?

Had Mr. Cordwell moved her room downstairs as a precaution?

She looked at me with an innocent gaze.

"Everyone in the manor seemed to be making quite a fuss, so I came to see what was happening... I heard that a violent and lowly person who uses magic had entered the grounds, and I wondered if it might be you... and it was."

"...What's that supposed to mean? 'And it was'?"

Her words always sounded like she was looking for a fight, and my tone naturally got sharper.

"Oh, nothing. When I heard that, your face just happened to pop into my mind. And as it turned out, I was right..."

...This brat...

Normally, I'd blast her with an attack spell, but I didn't have time for that.

"Never mind that! Elemy, did Gardner come here!?"

"Gardner!? What do you mean?"

"Your father said if Gardner could rescue you, he might recognize your relationship. So, he came all the way here with me. We got separated because of the guards..."

"Oh, then there's no need to worry. Gardner will never be caught."

Elemy spoke with total confidence, not showing a hint of concern.

"...But there are a ton of guards."

"It's fine. Really. Once, Gardner made a mistake and broke a vase my father cherished. He was so scared of getting in trouble that he hid in the manor... It took five days to find him. By the time they did, he was suffering from severe dehydration and was on the brink of death."

...Hid for five days and almost died of dehydration because he was scared of getting in trouble?

I couldn't tell if that meant he had spine or not.

And Elemy was talking about it so fondly...

But then, her expression clouded over.

"...But more importantly, Lina-san... actually... I'm troubled... I came here on my father's orders for etiquette training, and eventually to marry the son here, Parris... Honestly, I hated the idea. But—this Parris... once I actually met him..."

She trailed off, her face turning red.

Wait.

Does that mean—

"...Could it be... he's actually your type...?"

"Yes... well... actually."

She looked away with dreamy eyes, her cheeks flushing.

Wait just a minute!

This—this wasn't the plan!

The whole plan to rescue Elemy was based on the premise that she was devoted only to Gardner.

If I forcibly took her back now, while she still had feelings for this Parris guy, it would lead to trouble later.

People always long for what they can't have.

I was about to put my head in my hands, but Elemy, oblivious to my inner turmoil, clenched her fists and tilted her head in a girly way.

"He's so manly, and yet he somehow reminds me of Gardner..."

I see—so that's it.

If he reminds her of Gardner, he must be fairly handsome.

A handsome boy who reminds her of her lover, and yet is 'manly.' It’s easy to see how her heart could waver in her loneliness.

"Oh—of course, I love Gardner from the bottom of my heart. I do love him, but... how should I say it? At the same time, I can feel myself being drawn to Parris. Oh... my maidenly heart, wavering between two wonderful gentlemen..."

...Well, feel free to waver, but it’s a real pain for me.

"Please tell me, Lina-san! What should I do!?"

"How should I know...?"

"I know I’m older, but unlike me, who was raised in a noble home, you’ve been left to wander like a stray dog... surely you’ve had experiences you couldn't tell other people about..."

She’s trying to say I have more life experience... but is there really no other way to put it?

She makes it sound so bad.

There really are people who, no matter what they say, sound like they’re picking a fight.

...Well, some say she’s just insensitive and naturally arrogant.

"—So, I’d be so happy if you could give me some advice on what to do in a situation like this..."

"I don't have any!"

"Oh... if you could give me some useful advice, I'd be happy to give you two or three gold coins as a reward..."

"Listen, Elemy."

I put my hand on her shoulder.

"First—it's important to be honest with your own heart. Of course, how much the other person loves you matters too, but if you choose one when your own mind isn't made up, a time will come when you'll think, 'If only I'd chosen the other one back then.'"

"...Honest with my own heart..."

Elemy whispered.

"—So in the end, it's not other people, but I myself who must decide."

"Exactly."

I nodded.

"So—in the end, I'm the one who decides. No matter what advice you give, Lina-san, it won't really mean much. So of course, there's no need for a reward, is there?"

"!?"

...Dammit! She got me!

"W-well, but...!"

"I understand. I'll look into my own heart again and try to organize my feelings. Gardner, or..."

"—Oh, speaking of which, Gardner still hasn't been found, has he?"

"Ah."

I finally remembered him.

The commotion from the guards was still going on. That meant he hadn't been caught yet.

"...I wonder if he's just that good at hiding—"

"Or maybe he's already run away."

...Wait!?

My face stiffened at Elemy's words.

...Run away... knowing Gardner, it’s a definite possibility—

"Anyway! That's it for today! I'll be back!"

I turned and ran before I even finished saying goodbye.

—Night in the city, visible through the window.

The faint light of streetlamps and a sky full of stars.

And a waning moon shining on the mountain ridge.

Amber liquid swayed slightly in the tilted cup.

Gardner gazed at the distant night sky and murmured.

"Phew... this is so relaxing..."

"SO RELAXING!?"

CRASH!

As I kicked the door open, my foot slammed right into the back of Gardner's head.

"Wh-what was that for!? In the middle of my peaceful moment!?"

"That's what I’m saying! Why are you soaking in a peaceful moment!? You were supposed to be rescuing Elemy! But no! You ran back to the inn by yourself and are relaxing!?"

"Ugh...! That... well... I had a sudden stomachache..."

"I’ve heard that excuse before! I told you! Remember that you're the only one who can rescue Elemy!"

"I... I forgot."

"Don't 'I forgot' me! If you keep this up, Elemy’s going to be taken by that Parris guy!"

"Whaaaaaat!? No way!?"

"What are you going to do if that happens!?"

"I'll... I'll mope."

"Aaaaaagh! He’s hopeless!"

I shouted and put my head in my hands at his instantaneous reply.

"How can you say that!? Do you really love Elemy!?"

"Of course—"

"Then! Pull yourself together! Get a grip!"

"Y-yes!"

Whether he finally understood or was just overwhelmed by my energy, he nodded frantically.

"So... what should I do...?"

"What should you do...? Well..."

I faltered.

Rescuing Elemy was the main goal.

But just taking her back wouldn't settle her feelings.

—Then, the solution is—

"Alright! This is the only way!"

I declared with full confidence and nodded to myself.

"What are you going to do?"

"It's a secret for now. Tomorrow—if everything goes well, it'll all be settled!"

"Um, where are we going?"

It was a little before noon the next day when I took Gardner and left the inn.

"You can probably guess, right?"

"...You don't mean Mr. Cordwell’s manor!?"

"Exactly."

"No way! You’re going to sneak in during the day!?"

"I’m not sneaking in. Anyway, just leave it to me."

Pulling along a still-protesting Gardner, I eventually arrived in front of Mr. Cordwell’s manor.

—Right at the front entrance.

"—Ah!? You! From yesterday!"

One of the guards standing by the gate pointed at me and shouted.

He must have been one of the guys who chased me last night. I didn't remember his face, of course.

"I’d like to see Mr. Gaius!"

I declared boldly, completely ignoring the man’s agitation.

"...W-what!? Don't be ridiculous! Just wait! I’ll catch you right now..."

"Are you sure? You'll be shaming your employer’s name. You’ll lose your job."

"What!? What’s that supposed to mean!?"

"Think about it. I came as an intruder last night, sure. But today, I’ve come as a guest through the front entrance. Does Mr. Cordwell really want rumors going around that he captures guests without a word?"

"That's absurd! Like that would work!"

"Whether it works or not is for the world and Mr. Cordwell to decide, don't you think?"

"...Urgh..."

The man was at a loss for words.

I don't know if it’s something to be proud of, but not many people can out-argue me when it comes to logic-chopping.

And then, the final blow.

"—Well, I don't really care if you get fired later for wasting time instead of checking with him."

"...Fine! I'll go ask! Just stay right there!"

He stomped off, and I let out a satisfied grin at his retreating back.

—It was a short while later that Gaius invited Gardner and me inside.

"So you've come as a guest today?"

In the drawing room, without even offering tea, Gaius spoke as soon as he saw our faces.

"Yes. At least for today, I won't lay a hand on Elemy."

"And I’m supposed to believe that? The nonsense of someone who broke into my house last night?"

I shrugged at his sharp tone.

"You don't have to believe it. You've probably got people stationed all over the place to catch us the moment we do anything weird, right?"

"...Hmph..."

A small smile appeared on his face.

"—So? Your business?"

"To be blunt—I’m here to suggest a quick way to settle this."

I pointed with my eyes at Gardner, who was sitting nervously next to me.

"You know from last night that I and Gardner use magic. And you know we’re not easily caught. —But for us, with this many guards, it’s not easy to take Elemy out either. At this rate, we’re just wasting time. So—I thought of an interesting way."

"Oh—?"

Just as I expected, the word 'interesting' made his expression flicker.

He really was the type who hungered for entertainment.

"And? What is this method?"

"A two-round match. The first round: Gardner and I will navigate through the guards you’ve stationed to reach a designated spot. If Gardner is caught, we lose. If he makes it, we move to the second round."

"—And the second round?"

"The second round is—a one-on-one duel between Gardner and your Parris, right in front of Elemy."

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?"

It was Gardner who let out the cry of shock.

Ignoring him, I continued.

"However, Gardner won't use any magic in the second round. If he wins, you hand over Elemy. If he loses, or if he’s caught in the first round, we give up on taking her. How about it?"

"—Hm—that does sound interesting."

Yes!

I smirked to myself.

Round one aside, the second-round duel would be hard for Gardner to win without magic.

But—it was fine if he lost. To be honest.

I said 'we'd give up on taking her,' but I didn't say 'he'd give up on her.'

Elemy said Parris reminds her of Gardner.

That means, though she might not realize it, her heart is still with Gardner.

If Gardner wins the duel, great. If he loses, seeing the man who loves her getting beaten up for her sake will surely move Elemy's heart.

In technical terms, it's 'losing the battle but winning the love.'

...Of course, this too was a pattern from some old song, but hey, if the result is good, it’s all good.

It didn't exactly match the condition Mr. Clove set, but I was confident I could talk him around by saying Gardner showed spine by dueling for her.

...As long as Gardner didn't run away on the day...

Gardner was muttering something next to me, but he didn't seem to have the spine to protest to Gaius’s face.

Eventually, Gaius thought for a moment and gave a small nod.

"I accept the challenge! Five days from now, I will set the stage. Tell me where you’re staying. I’ll send you the details!"

—And so.

The 'Battle for Elemy' was officially on.

Five days later—

Gardner and I arrived at the edge of town.

The goal of the first round was to pass through the course Gaius had set and reach his manor.

I didn't think he'd use the whole town as a stage, but I guess Gaius had a lot of influence here.

But we were definitely winning round one!

My daily 'negotiations'—which mostly involved asking Gardner if he knew what would happen to him if he ran away—had worked, and he'd actually shown up.

...Well, his legs were shaking a little.

"Don't worry, Gardner. This first round is a piece of cake."

"A piece of cake...? There are definitely guards Gaius hired all over the course! And we can't leave the course...!"

"I told you it's fine. We both can use Raywing, right?"

It's a high-speed flight spell that wraps the caster in a wind barrier. The barrier acts as a shield, so weak arrows or Flame Arrows won't even scratch us.

It can't stop powerful spells, but no one's going to use those in the middle of town.

With this, we can just blast through, no matter how many guards there are.

"...Well, that's true... but it's scary when we go too fast..."

"—Hey, Gardner."

I patted his shoulder and asked with a smile.

"Do I really have to blast you with a Dragon Slave from behind to get you to fly?"

"I'll fly! I'll fly, okay!?"

"Glad to hear it. —Now then..."

I looked toward the center of town—toward Gaius's manor.

A single trail of smoke was rising into the air from that direction.

The signal to start.

"—Here we go! Gardner! Max speed!"

I began my chant. Gardner's voice joined mine.

And our voices overlapped.

"Raywing!"

A wind barrier wrapped around us. I signaled Gardner and floated up into the air—

And then, acceleration!

The scenery began to blur as it flew past. Making sure Gardner was keeping up, I raced along the planned course.

Soon, obstructors began appearing along the streets!

But it was only for a split second. Before they could even react to our speed, we'd already left them in the dust.

Every now and then, an Ice Arrow would fly our way, but of course, it didn't hurt a bit.

Ha! Piece of cake!

Just as I thought that, something entered my field of vision.

—At first, I thought Gardner had overtaken me.

But—no!

A completely unknown sorcerer was flying alongside us using Raywing.

And before we'd gone much further, another sorcerer joined in from the side, also using Raywing!

And another, and another!

Eventually, six sorcerers were flying right beside us.

...What...!?

Raywing is much harder to control than Levitation, so it's not very common. To find six sorcerers who can use it...

The six sorcerers slowly began to close the distance, surrounding Gardner and me.

This—is bad.

Because of the wind barrier, this spell deflects most external attacks, but it also prevents the caster from attacking from the inside.

In other words—if you're surrounded by people using the same spell, there's nothing you can do.

I could manage alone, but if I tried to escape, I might lose Gardner.

I tried some zig-zagging for a bit, but the six sorcerers weren't fooled and kept closing in.

—Eventually—

"...Ugh...!"

Gardner and I were sandwiched between three sorcerers each, just a short distance from the Cordwell estate.

One of the sorcerers moved in front of me and began to slow down.

—Are they trying to stop me!?

I wanted to find a gap and zoom past, but the other two wouldn't let me.

I glanced over at Gardner...

Finally unable to take the pressure, he cancelled his spell and landed on the ground.

Ah! The manor is right there!

There was no point in leaving him. I reluctantly cancelled my spell too and ran over to his side.

The six sorcerers landed, silently surrounding us.

"—Looks like it ends at the first stage."

The voice came from the manor.

Looking over, Gaius was walking toward us with a triumphant grin, having watched from somewhere.

He looked at me and said,

"—I saw you using that spell the night you broke in. So, I contacted the Sorcerers' Guild and spent the last five days gathering people who could use the same spell."

...Ugh... He even had influence with the Sorcerers' Guild!

"Now—it's game end. Capture them!"

At Gaius's command, the six sorcerers trembled slightly.

And then—a brief silence.

"What's wrong!? If you're not good at physical combat, you can just use magic to put them to sleep!"

The sorcerers trembled again at his words.

...Wait... could it be...?

"—You said you looked for sorcerers who could use Raywing," I said, looking from Gaius to one of the nearby sorcerers.

"...What about other spells...?"

Twitch!

At my words, the sorcerers' faces cramped up.

...I knew it... Raywing is the only spell they can use properly...

"Bomb Di Wind!"

BOOM!

With one of my moderated spells, the whole group of sorcerers was blown away.

Gaius must have really trusted this sorcerer corps, because there weren't any other guards around.

Plus, the manor was right in front of us.

"—First round cleared, it seems."

I said with a grin to a dumbfounded Gaius.

And so—

The courtyard of the Cordwell estate became the stage for the second round.

A duel between Gardner, who was forbidden from using magic, and Parris Cordwell.

The one who decided the rules and acted as the witness was none other than Elemy herself.

When Gardner, Gaius, and I arrived in the courtyard, everything was already prepared.

A variety of weapons were lined up—maces, wavy-bladed swords, halberds, and battle-axes.

Standing among dozens of weapons was Elemy, alone, wearing an orange frilly dress and giving a graceful bow.

"...Where is Parris...?"

Gaius asked with a sour expression, and Elemy spoke with a dreamy look.

"He ran away."

...Eh...?

Gardner and I were stunned.

But Gaius didn't seem particularly surprised.

"Drat! I knew he'd run! Someone! Go find Parris! He must be on the grounds! That boy doesn't have the courage to leave the property alone!"

...Sounds like someone else I know...

"W-what's going on here...?"

As I asked, Elemy spoke in a calm tone.

"He did come to the courtyard on Uncle Gaius's orders... but once I explained the rules, he ran away."

"...Rules?"

"Yes. Since I didn't want anything to happen to either of the gentlemen fighting for me, I decided they could use any of these weapons freely, and the match would end when one of them lost consciousness."

...In that case, someone's usually going to die.

Gardner began to tremble next to me upon hearing the rules.

But based on what Elemy and Gaius said about Parris, could it be...

"Um, Elemy, I've been meaning to ask... you said before that Parris reminds you of Gardner. Did you mean... in terms of personality?"

"Of course."

AAAAAAAGH! I KNEW IT!

"B-but, 'manly'...!?"

"They are both manly. Both Gardner and Parris, when forced to do something they hate, can't say 'no' clearly. They just laugh in the moment and then cry in secret later... most gentlemen couldn't do that. It’s quite unique."

...*And you call that manly?*

Well, I knew Elemy’s values were... unique, but still...

As we were talking, a man was brought in, held by the arms by servants.

A tall, handsome young man with blonde hair and blue eyes, his face was now twisted with terror and a flood of tears.

"No! I don't want a duel! Father! Help meeeee!"

Gaius’s scolding voice rang out.

"Shut up! Honestly... how pathetic, even for my own son! I went to all this trouble to give you some courage, and you run away! Be a man and accept the challenge!"

...I see. Gaius accepted my proposal so easily because he had that in mind too.

Parris looked around as if seeking help, and eventually, perhaps sensing a kindred spirit, he looked at the trembling Gardner.

"Y-you! You're the one I’m dueling, Gardner-san!? Please! Let's stop this! I’m begging you!"

"I... I agree. Let's stop."

"My!? Gardner! Do you not love me!?"

"N-no! It’s not that, Elemy! It's just... I'm scared and I want to run away...!"

Elemy immediately cut in, and Gardner made an excuse that wasn't an excuse.

Elemy then turned to Parris.

"Parris—do you not love me!?"

"I DON'T!"

Parris let out a scream.

"Because! Elemy-san, you bully me!"

"Oh my."

For some reason, Elemy blushed at Parris's words.

"So that means... it's like what gentlemen often say: 'no means yes'?"

"NO IT DOESN'T!"

Watching the three of them in disbelief, I eventually turned my gaze to Gaius standing next to me.

"...What are we going to do about... this...?"

"...I don't know..."

As I asked with a weary voice, Gaius murmured back with an equally weary gaze.

—In the end—

I should mention that both Gardner and Parris ended up crying, and the duel was called off.

"—Thank you for everything."

Elemy gave me a polite bow.

The day after the failed duel incident.

Gaius had decided to send Elemy back to her home. From Verna City, it would be a two-person trip for Elemy and Gardner.

I was parting ways with them here.

I could say I was being considerate—but honestly, I just couldn't deal with them anymore.

I'd already received my fee.

Gardner didn't have any money, so Elemy had paid it for him.

He'll probably be bullied by her for the rest of his life using that debt as leverage.

...Well, if he's happy, I guess it's fine...

The letter Gaius wrote to Mr. Clove said this:

—Parris and Gardner are both spineless, no matter how you look at it. In that case, those who love each other should be together.—

As I watched Gardner and Elemy walk away, I thought to myself:

Mr. Clove is probably going to cry when he reads that letter...

(The Spineless Battle: End)

Afterword

Author: Hello, everyone! Sorry to keep you waiting! Here is *Slayers Special: Beat the Hero!*

L: When you really think about it, it’s been almost a year since the last *Special* came out, hasn't it?

Author: That’s right. I didn't even realize it until my editor pointed it out.

L: ...There you go with those irresponsible remarks again... By the way—now that you’ve revealed my true identity in Volume 8 of the main series... are we seriously sticking with this format for the afterword?

Author: Why not? It feels a bit late to change the format now.

L: I see. So it's author-authorized. ...Which means... *Heh heh heh*... You won’t mind if I bash you over the head with a flowerpot or something and hijack this afterword, right!?

Author: *Gah!* You’re actually going through with—!?

THWACK!

L: ...Hmph... Pathetic... All right! It’s been a while, so let's do this! An exclusive afterword on behalf of the author!

Author Proxy "L"

Man. After sinking the author so blatantly on the previous page, I feel a bit weird calling myself the "Author Proxy" at this point. Well, let's just say it's for the sake of the mood.

As mentioned on the last page, my identity was revealed in the afterword of Main Volume 8. Of course, people who had noticed by then already knew—but it seems almost no one stopped to wonder why "Subordinate S" wasn't "Subordinate R."

That's right. My "L" doesn't stand for the "L" in "Lord," but rather the first letter of my actual name. ...Well... as the writing progressed, I've become something entirely different from my original form.

When you keep writing a series, it's common for settings to change. It seems the author himself never expected this *Slayers* series—which he wrote on a whim—to spread this far. The proof is that he went and defeated a near-strongest class character right in the very first volume.

However—thanks to all of you, the series received a reception far exceeding the author's expectations. Before we knew it, things moved fast, and they even put out a video game. ...*Sniff*. *Sniff*. You've grown up so much. Mommy is so happy.

Speaking of which, I hear rumors that besides the game, various other plans for *Slayers* are in motion. —*Tch!* Dammit! I should have kept the author alive until I made him spit out the details! (He's not dead, he's not dead). Well, regarding these "plans" that I'm so teasingly hinting at, there should be an announcement in *Dragon Magazine* or elsewhere as soon as they reach a stage where they can be made public.

Now then, the real question is whether or not the second arc of the main *Slayers* series will start without a hitch. So, here are L's wild predictions! Part 2 of *Slayers* will go like this:

1. The rest of the Ruby-Eye Demon King show up in droves, and the world happily perishes into darkness.
2. Greater Beast Groucherra and Sea King Dolphin appear one after another and get thrashed repeatedly.
3. Lina's sister from back home suddenly appears, drags Lina back, and it ends.
4. I become the main character.
5. The author runs away and it never starts.

...I'm the one who made these predictions, but... I feel like some of those are too close for comfort...

Anyway, what is certain is that the beginning will likely involve "Gourry's search for a sword." It seems the author gave that answer when his editor asked him. Actually, without an anti-monster weapon, that character is just a skilled swordsman.

But looking at future developments calmly... we had the Demon King in Volume 1, then his subordinates at the end of Part 1... It feels like the "Final Bosses" are getting weaker... Does that mean—!? Is the final enemy of Part 2 going to be some "local thug" or a "weird bug"!?

...Nah, no way... Even if the author tried to do that, everyone around him would stop him.

Looking at the author's schedule, another volume of *Special* will come out, and then Part 2 will finally begin around next spring... but then again, this is an author who blathers on about how "the future is interesting because you don't know what will happen!"

So, please wait for it without counting on it too much. Well, that’s about it for this time. See you all again someday!

(Afterword: End)